犬村小六
イラスト＝森沢晴行
とある飛空士への追憶

Remembrances for a Certain Pilot

とある飛空士への追憶
to aru hikuushi e no tsuioku

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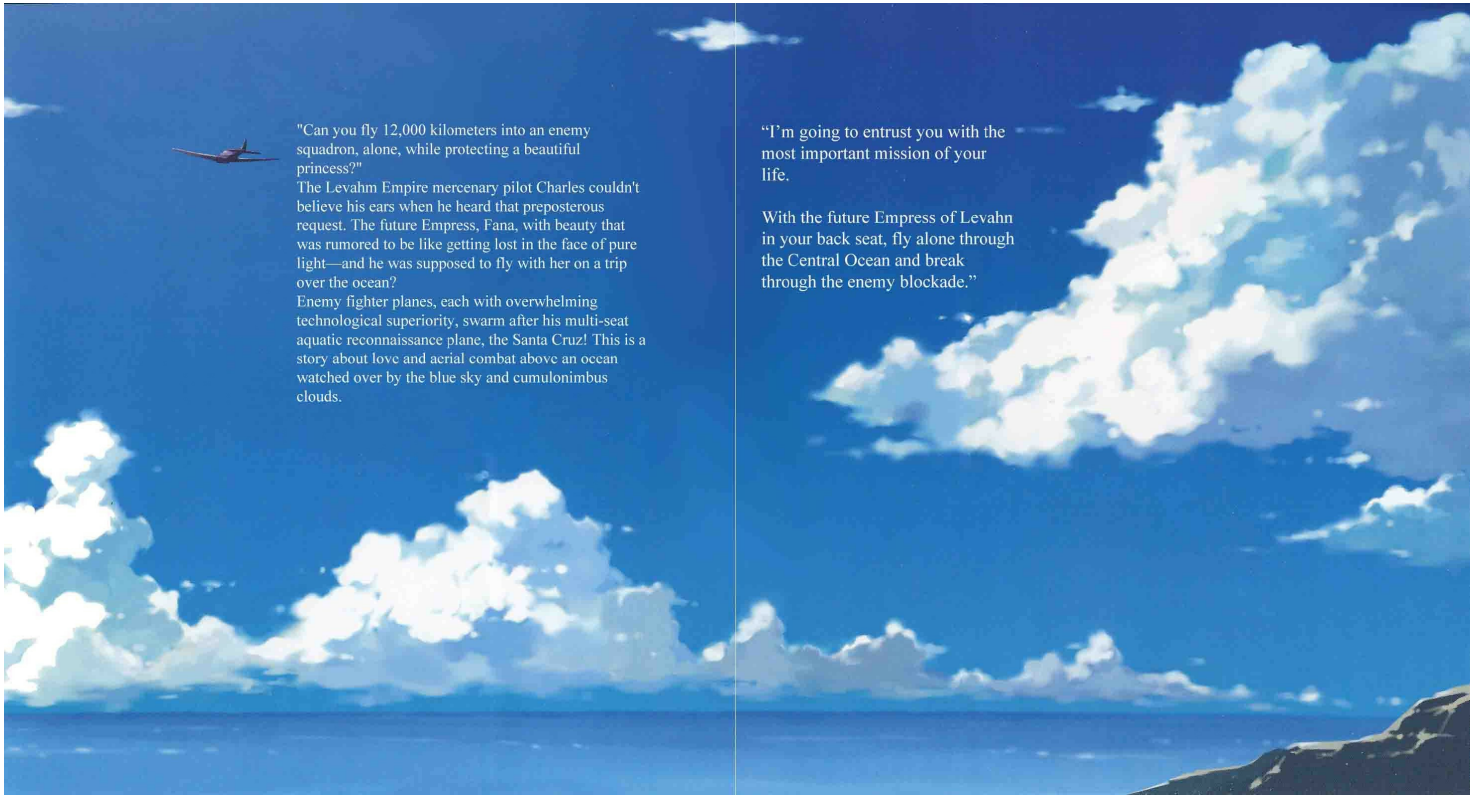
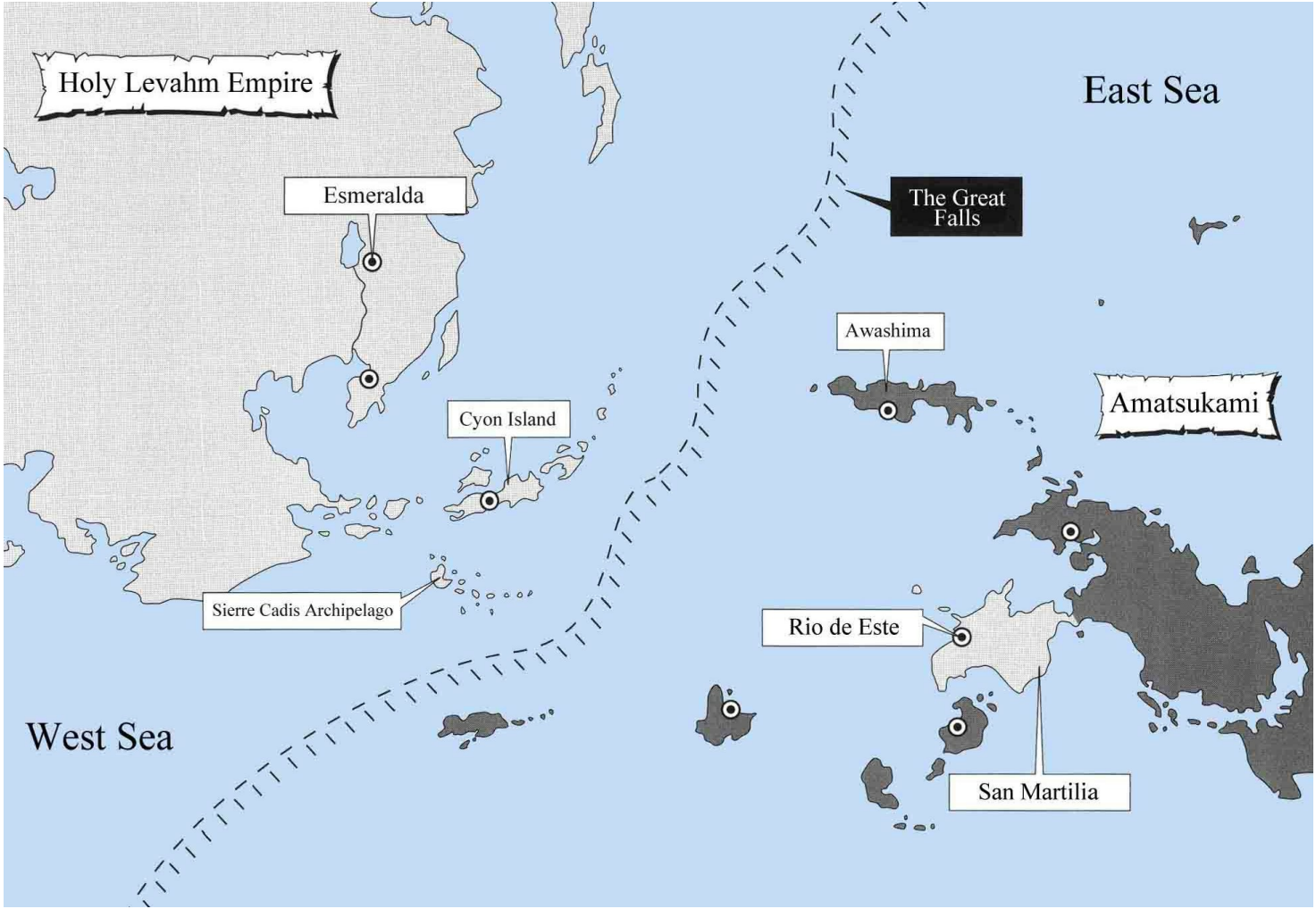


"Can you fly 12,000 kilometers into an enemy squadron, alone, while protecting a beautiful princess?"
The Levahm Empire mercenary pilot Charles couldn't believe his ears when he heard that preposterous request. The future Empress, Fana, with beauty that was rumored to be like getting lost in the face of pure light—and he was supposed to fly with her on a trip over the ocean?
Enemy fighter planes, each with overwhelming technological superiority, swarm after his multi-seat aquatic reconnaissance plane, the Santa Cruz! This is a story about love and aerial combat above an ocean watched over by the blue sky and cumulonimbus clouds.

“I’m going to entrust you with the most important mission of your life.

With the future Empress of Levahn in your back seat, fly alone through the Central Ocean and break through the enemy blockade.”


Holy Levahm Empire
East Sea
Esmeralda
The Great Falls
Awashima
Amatsukami
Cyon Island
Sierre Cadis Archipelago
Rio de Este
West Sea
San Martilia

Prologue

It’s on days like today, when I have the money from my toil and sweat taken from me by force, get beaten up, and have my swollen face forced into a puddle by the side of the road.

On days like this I remember one girl, wearing a white one-piece.

She's standing in a sunflower field, her silvery-white hair fluttering, staring at me with equally silvery eyes as she speaks.

“Promise me you won't cry anymore."

“Even if you get lonely, don't do anything bad. Okay?”

I just nod obediently. The girl smiles like the sunflowers behind her, reaches out, and without even thinking about her pretty clothes getting dirty, embraces me. I don't know why, but I want to cry. But I'd just promised her not to cry anymore, so I hold it back. A pleasant warmth and smells drift from her, and feelings from deep within my soul, feelings I don't understand, like pain, grief, and misery, are wiped away.

I lift my head from the half-frozen water and wiped my face with my sleeve. A mixture of mud and blood smears onto the cloth. I touch my head; there are two big lumps.

A group of homeless Levahmian orphans had assaulted me. They'd mistaken me for an Amatsuvian and attacked me. Six of them. I didn’t stand a chance. All the money I'd earned from scrounging up iron scraps was stolen.

It wasn't the first time I'd been attacked by a group of orphans. Violence is a daily occurrence here in the Amadora slums of Rio de Este, and people pay as much attention to it as they do to the cries of the pigeons. But my mother was an Amatsuvian and my father was a Levahmian, so I end up being targeted by Levahmian orphan groups too, which is really frustrating. It's been a year since my mother was stabbed and killed by a drunk, and I've since remained unable to join either group. And as my parents had no friends, I've been stuck living here alone.

Bestado.

People like me, with mixed blood from both countries, are given that label and are reviled for it. In areas of conflict like San Martilia, where the two powers are constantly struggling with each other, bestados, who you'd think should fit in with society regardless of which power is in control, are considered untrustworthy and end up being shunned. Of course, the reality is that bestados can't fit in with either society, so there's no actual benefit. Instead, they are faced with endless hate and distrust. As a lone orphan, all I can do is carry this label to my grave.

Pressing a hand against my hurting head and wrapping the other arm around my empty stomach, I wander around the city looking for a place to sleep for the night as I shiver in the cold air. Every so often, I cough. It's a cough coming from the depths of my lungs, reeking of metal. The narrow stoned alleyways are a mess of rotten vegetables and household garbage, horse dung and urine. People who'd not once taken a bath in their life and wear clothing they'd never washed hold a bottle of gin in one hand and shout insults at each other with mouths which had never been cleaned. Every now and then, black liquid falls down onto the rancid streets below. It's the contents of buckets which are sometimes flung from the windows of houses above. If you're unlucky and get hit directly, even during the winter you end up needing to wash yourself in water. I try to avoid traveling next to buildings as I walk, looking up at the December sky.

The thin sliver of sky framed by buildings is gray.

I hadn't seen the light of the sun in a long time.

During winter, everyone fires up their charcoal stoves, so the whole city is covered in a light grey smog. Of course, this means the air is filled with ashen dust, too. My coughing is probably a result of constantly breathing it in.

I'd last eaten three days ago. I can feel the edges of my limbs starting to freeze. Tears begin to well up from the loneliness and sadness. But I hold them back. Because I'd promised not to cry anymore, to that wonderful girl.

But, even so… Even so, there's a limit to everything.

I stop moving forward.

Crumpling down at the edge of the road, I lay down to rest on the cold, dirty ground.

It's impossible to live alone as a bestado in this city. Amatsuvians and Levahmians

would never become friendly with each other. That's why there's no place for someone like me, of mixed blood, to go. The only haven for me lies not here on the ground, but beyond the clouds, above the sky.

I think I'll sleep here.

I'll close my eyes, and recall my memories of that girl. And then tomorrow morning I'll be just the body of another frozen orphan by the wayside. A road cleaner will mutter in annoyance while he lifts my corpse, no longer coursing blood, and haul me off to a heap of trash, along with the bodies of dogs, cats, and crows. Eventually the whole pile will be incinerated somewhere outside of the city.

That's fine.

Living is so sad, so painful, it's just not worth it. I just want to become nothing.

But just as I'd made my determination, the sound of thunder from far away rattles my bones.

The low, heavy jarring of vibrating air reaches all the way to the pit my stomach.

Realizing that it didn't sound right for thunder, I turn my head and look straight up at the cloudy sky. Like an ocean's storm that had been pasted upside-down onto the heavens, the ashen clouds boil up, dinning, and groaning.

Babababababa

A sound like that of a giant bee's wings falls from beyond the clouds.

The thick smoggy layer that acted as a lid for the city is parted like cotton.

Sunlight pokes through the opening. It bundles up in many separate rays, cutting through the dark sky, and stains the dirty roads with a golden hue.

And then, pushing the clouds apart, an aerial warship with the shape of a woodlouse descends. It's a giant airship around 100 meters in length, weighing more than 40,000 tons. At the bottom of its wide, curved body are six enormous dynamic lifting devices which make a chorus of raucous humming sounds as the sea of clouds is ripped apart. The ship carries itself with such magnificent presence, as if it were capable of ruling the sky. Several half-spherical fortifications can be seen on both sides of the ship, each fitted with a large cannon, keeping watch over the surrounding airspace.

"*Ohhh*!" People walking along the roads gasp in amazement. The Levahmians lift their voices in pride, while the Amatsuvian bite their lips in envy. Everyone stops moving as they look up at the aerial warship, as if they were gazing up at an angel from heaven.

I can't help but feel wonder every time I see such a heavy heap of metal flying. It's made possible by the incredible power generation of metal-hydride batteries. Even while half-dead and lying sideways on the ground, I feel entranced. It's definitely not the worst backdrop I could ask for, for my last sight of the world.

The lifting devices groan as the ship turns its head eastward. Perhaps it's flying to the border of Amatsu to issue a challenge. The Levahm imperial family has been letting its aerial might speak for itself, with the intention to grab more territory from the Amatsu. The frequency of these aerial shows of power has been increasing of late.

Leaving an incredible wake behind, forcing aside clouds as if it were floating through a frozen sea, the aerial warship passes over me. Most of the sky has been cleared, and the translucent December sunlight stains the alley with bright beams.

Several dozen propeller-powered "Iris" fighter planes fly alongside the warship. The sound of lifting devices drown out the noise of the propellers, but the brand-new machines gleam in the sunlight as they glide across the blue sky with their elegant, two-winged bodies.

Still lying sideways on the ground, with only my head facing up, I continue to stare at the majestic warship and fighter planes.

The sky is pretty.

For some reason that thought springs to mind.

All the people here spitting as they walk, the rotten smelling vegetable market, the gutters piling up on the side of streets, the cries of street peddlers, the disease-ridden wild dogs, the dirty, smelly beggars… None of that exists in the sky. The clear, endless sky.

I feel such envy at people who can fly freely in such a pretty place.

A single teardrop wells up and falls from my eyes.

I stretch out my hand, trying to grasp the sky. But it doesn't reach. It can't grasp

anything. The fleet of Irises pay no heed to the hungry orphan on the verge of death, and calmly soar onward, eventually vanishing from the canopy.

I want to live in that pretty sky.

If only I could live like I was melting into that pure, spotless blue, instead of this dirty ground.

If I could live in that endless sky, with no class hierarchy, no poverty, no contempt, no scorn, I wouldn't need anything else in the world.

With the last of my strength, my one hand still stretched upwards, I let out a wordless scream. God had brought so much suffering upon me for so long. Would it hurt him to fulfill just that one wish?

At that moment—

I realize that someone had clasped my hand, the hand that could not reach anything, that could not grasp anything.

An aging man with a large beard encompassing his mouth gazes at me as if he were examining my soul, and smiles.

The black robes of an Aldista Church priest enters my vision.

"You don’t want to die, do you?” he asks in a soft voice, as though he were reading my very heart.

Chapter 1

Before being named San Martilia, 55 years before now, this region was called "Tsunebino."

In Amatsukami, it means, "the forever cloudless plains." As its name suggests, it was a clear, beautiful plain, and until the Levahmians passed the central ocean and invaded, it had only been inhabited by some poor fishing villages.

Overcoming the central ocean, the Holy Levahm Empire reigned over the western continent, and the Imperial Amatsukami, the eastern continent. The culture, art, and schooling of both great powers became mixed here, on San Martilia -a Levahmian autonomous region on Amatsukami territory like a floating island -and had become a blend very much unlike that Intercontinental trading capital, Rio de Este.

"That's why this city, with its mix of Amatsuvian and Levahmians, is a very unnatural sight to those of each country, is what Captain Domingo meant."

Seated in the carriage and wearing a plain, dark red dress, the tutor replies. Despite the constant danger of biting her tongue because of the rough surface of the road, the tutor raised the bridge of her glasses with her index finger, and unleashed cold, pointed words to the girl facing her.

Fana del Moral let the words slide past without breaking her emotionless façade. Looking away from the tutor, she gazed out the carriage window, at Rio de Este's sunset. Below the indigo-blue July sky, the solemn, stone-built city lined either side of the large road, and was lighted in brass by the falling sunlight.

For Fana, who'd been born and raised here, it was a normal sight. But a certain Levahmian regarded Rio de Este as a "Toy City." As if it weren't real, but rather a model. The towering white stone wall reflected the evening sun, and bounced back a golden hue. Every passing building was quite magnificent, but you could also feel a sort of coldness, as they also brushed aside every passer-by.

A steeple so tall that if you were to look up, your hat would fall off, a trust bank covered with white cosmetic mortar, an austere victory memorial supported at the front by a row of columns, a town hall made of smooth, simple brick, and to its side a

general public theater adorned with beautiful ornaments. Many magnificent pieces of architecture jostled for space on either side of the carriage.

And in front of these: a wandering salesman and his mobile soba store, a drunk hunched over, a wild dog, a cat, a crow corpse, Amatsuvian staring at the carriage in envy, an orphan covered in rags, a middle-aged prostitute. All these inhabitants of the shadows reminded observers that this used to be Amatsuvian territory.

Before the war, Levahmians wearing proper clothing used to strut around this road, but now, when the sun begins to set, poor Amatsuvian stream out of who-knows-where and start grouping up. Likely if a middle-class Levahmian walked these streets, they would immediately be attacked and stripped. You could still see flashes of the beauty that once was, but the air as a whole felt heavy, sickly, and stale. People sat by the road, or lay on their sides, and you could spot some Levahmians among them. They're people who lost their jobs because the funds that used to come into the city were cut.

The root cause of the stagnation was this unfavorable war.

Just half-a-year earlier, this city was like a dagger to the throat of Amatsukami, but now it's just stuck in the middle of enemy territory, and with no place to escape it'd simply become an island on its own.

The Amatsukami Air Division had cut through the Levahmian camp's communications lines, and was constantly fighting over airspace with the Levahmian Eastern Air, including that of San Martilia. If the Eastern Air Division were to fall, then the Levahmians of this city would become like mice in a bag, with no place to run.

Fana glanced upward. She saw the dusk sky, framed by the silhouettes of buildings.

Two transportation ships cruised away at low altitude. The ash-silver bodies reflected the sunset. They were probably headed for the border. Would the soldiers inside be able to return home?

Right now, the Amatsukami Fourth Ground Division was in occupation of the border and its surrounding areas. The moment the San Martilia airspace was taken from Levahmian hands, with one word from the Amatsukami emperor, roughly 120,000 ground troops would come storming in, in tandem with the air fleet. That would be the curtain call for the 55 years of San Martilia history. The gloom and the tenacious negativity inflicted on the Amatsuvian by the Levahmians for the better half of the century, would simply shift to those with no place to run. She didn't want to imagine

the sort of hell that would befall this place.

"Are you listening, my Lady?"

At those words, Fana's gloomy profile snapped to attention, then turned to the tutor.

"My apologies."

No emotion could be seen on Fana's face. She looked neither unapologetic nor defiant. It was like speaking to a wall.

The tutor closed her eyes, then pushed her glasses up again. Thirty years of hammering etiquette into noble ladies as her livelihood. With just one slender female arm, she'd straightened out so many failures, so many girls with energy and no heads, enough that she'd even been invited to the emperor's dinner parties.

Foolish children you wanted to strangle. Strong-willed, independent children, children who had problems with concentration and mental strength. Their numbers were so large she'd even contemplated writing a book on the difficulties of teaching them proper etiquette, but to this day she'd continued the job because of the satisfaction she'd feel with every success.

But Fana del Moral, the girl sitting in front of her, was the biggest problem and worst nightmare over her 30 years of tutoring.

She was 18. Born into the renowned House del Moral. The only daughter of Diego del Moral, the governor of San Martilia.

And… the future empress of Levahm.

The girl destined to marry the emperor.

She was already the fiancée of the current imperial prince, Carlo Levahm, and it was arranged that she would cross over to the western continent in six months' time for the formal marriage.

Emperor Figaro Levahm, loving the grandiose, wanted to make this wedding more gaudy than any in the past, and had started hiring slews of performers, artists, and architects to prepare for the wedding. If the handsome imperial prince and the lovely noble lady were to be married in a beautiful, dazzling wedding, the country would be sure to overflow with blessing. The ceremony must be so incredible that the darkening

feelings from the war would be blown away. That's why the tutor's job was so important.

But it was difficult dealing with Fana. Extremely difficult. Her interior and exterior were unreal. Especially her looks.

Abnormal beauty makes onlookers feel inferior.

The tutor struggled with this. These thirty years, she'd tutored enough students to go through all of her fingers three times over, but Fana was the first time she'd felt in danger of being worn down by a student.

It was possibly too strange to say it, but Fana del Moral was too beautiful.

A certain poet was said to have described Fana's looks as "comparable to the losing one's way in the absolute light," and that probably wasn't an exaggeration. Actually, you could even tilt your head to the side, wondering if that description was even enough.

This Fana, sitting across from the tutor, was like a work of art, created by God with all of God's creative and imaginative strength.

As someone made more like the nose crud of God, the tutor couldn't help but fall in love with the sight of absolute beauty. She was on such a different dimension that there was no space for anything like envy, and she simply would find herself with jaws agape, soul sucked away by God's true strength.

Her silver hair, long enough to reach her waist if let down, was raised and ornamented with a coral hairpin, and below the hair was an even brighter silver-white eye.

The eyes, shaded by long, silver eyelashes, glowed with such light that it seemed like stars had moved into them, and it would feel like magnificent forms were taking turns reflecting in them.

If you weren't careful, you'd be sucked into Fana's eyes. That's how deep they were. A fragile, fleeting beauty that was like the thin film of ice covering a lake at the onset of spring, like it would crack with a sound if you were to touch it.

And pure, healthy, milk-colored skin. Thin, rose-colored lips. Her seductive, voluptuous body, so flawless in a bath, was now covered in a grape-wine colored dress, snugly and modestly. But no matter how much clothing tried to hide physical attractiveness, it would seem like fiery sparks came forth from her silhouette. Any onlookers would be overcome with a supernatural feeling, of wanting to touch her, yet

feeling unworthy, as if she were otherworldly, and had come from some mysterious shore.

When Fana walked through the street, passerby would run into gas lamps, or fall off the road, or get run over by carriages. When Fana climbed stairs, young, middle-aged, and old would come tumbling from higher steps, having slipped off. And this wasn't limited to men. Women, too, would misplace a foot, then come tumbling down with bedazzled looks. It was so dangerous that as of late, it'd become customary to surround Fana with a wall of people whenever she had the need to climb stairs. Most people hearing this would shrug it off as a joke, but it was no lie that people were known for falling from the top of stairs upon seeing Fana.

And the things Fana wore were also magnificent.

Fifty years ago House del Moral blazed a path from the capital Esmeralda to Rio de Este, then founded a trading capital off the power of a grand airship, raking in enough capital to turn it into essentially a small country. It shouldn't be a surprise that the Lady of House del Moral would be adorned with expensive ornaments, but it was still abnormal how much money Duke Diego had spent adorning his beloved daughter.

House del Moral, having essentially formulated in just two generations, was a newcomer to the Levahm imperial court. This meant that compared to the stars of the court, they lacked history and lineage. Diego wanted to solidify House del Moral's standing in the court, and so wanted to wed Fana to a deeply rooted and powerful family. Thus Diego spent enough money that "Fana's jewelry would be able to buy an entire fleet," and the gold, silver, and gems numbered so many that she would never wear the same thing on consecutive days. Plus, esteemed designers were entrusted with fitting her every day, so that it was never in poor taste, but in fact specifically calculated to bring out the most of her beauty.

On top of these things, in order to prevent other would-be suitors from taking place at her side, it was determined that any dress of hers that had been seen by others was never to be worn again. And truthfully, no matter how much of a dramatic impact one may have had, the tutor could not remember ever having seen it again. The Fana-exclusive dressing room on the third floor of the del Moral household was home to at least 2,000 dresses, rivaling three months' worth of salary for a middle-class citizen, and that number was sure to keep rising.

Fana’s physique and personal appearance were so overwhelming that, skipping the deeply rooted and powerful families, she'd shot through the heart of the imperial

prince, Carlo Levahm. It was a wedding pushed strongly by the prince himself. Duke Diego's wishes had come to fruition. Once tied to the imperial family, the status of House del Moral was promised. Moreover, as a link between the imperial family and the common-folk, many enterprises and investors came forward, wanting to use the opportunity to spread their businesses. This money was in turn invested into Fana, and her beauty kept soaring to new heights. All that was left was the smooth completion of the wedding ceremony, and Fana needed to be imbued with proper etiquette for that.

It was time for a veteran of dealing with foolish noble daughters, ladies who were not comfortable dealing with social norms. The tutor of 30 years' experience.

But Fana's looks made the tutor of a thousand seas and mountains shrink.

When the clear eyes peered straight into her, the words coming out of her mouth would lose their momentum, then start to shrivel back into her throat.

Wouldn't words from this imperfect self, directly toward such a flawless being, possibly dirty her beyond return? If God had made Fana del Moral to show off his artistic talents, then the tutor would have been made to prove he had a sense of humor. Such self-deprecating thoughts would subconsciously rise, and make her want to wrap herself up and run away.

But being mesmerized by Fana with mouth half-open would not be her job.

She had to warn Fana about her speech and conduct at today's garden party.

The tutor closed her eyes and took a deep breath, waited for her pulse to settle, then opened her eyes.

"As Captain Domingo said, it is proper to treat San Martilia’s Amatsuvian as one would treat domestic animals. There is no need to embrace them as people. That is also the will of the Emperor. If you cannot accept the words of your soon-to-be father-in-law, you will struggle to live in the imperial court."

The silver eyes, like the frozen surface of a lake, remained motionless, stabbing through the tutor. Just being looked at was enough to make the brain come close to being paralyzed. However, she mustn't back down, the tutor told herself, as she continued her words.

"Amatsuvian are pitiful at heart. If you show them kindness, they'll simply use it as a means of abusing you. And it is the mistress who will find her values questioned. Do

you understand?"

"Apologies."

Fana's emotionless words came back, like the tutor had thrown a rubber ball at a wall.

She didn't understand. In fact, the tutor's words were simply going in one ear and out the other. It was as if Fana's consciousness was covered by skin, and words thrown from outside were simply caught by the skin, and softly bounced back, never to reach the soul.

A curious girl.

Normally she was so boundless that it was impossible to grasp what she may be thinking, then sometimes she would open her mouth and say unexpected things.

It was the same, at the garden party.

"As with Levahmians, Amatsuvian have a variety of people, too. They have proud people, they have vile people, sympathetic people, evil people, and people who are both good and bad. Is it the doing of cultured people to simply round them up as vile and leave it at that?"

The captain had been speaking in disdain of the Amatsuvian, and Fana, who'd been silent up to that point, suddenly burst out with that line. The cheerful mood of the party suddenly turned ice cold, and an insufferable silence followed. The captain, struggling with how to deal with the future empress, stared at her tutor with eyes begging for help. She, in turn, wanted to use the fruit knife nearby to commit suicide.

Until the carriage went through the House del Moral gate, the tutor continued lecturing about Levahmian Imperial Court etiquette. Fana's replies were either "apologies" or "understood."

The sun had already set. The carriage continued on the long path to the mansion.

Perhaps due to the evening darkness, the del Moral mansion looked like it was spreading wings, far out in the distance. A flickering gas stove lit the white walls and stained everything with a bluish-white tone, making it stand out from the darkness.

No matter how much the carriage went forward, the mansion didn't seem to be getting any closer. That was how vast the garden was, and how big the building was.

In recent years, neat exteriors had become favored in Levahm. Unnecessary decorations were brushed away, and the size of the building was used to demonstrate grandeur. Forced to take part in such a ritual, the carriage ran quite a distance in the garden before finally being embraced by the]-shaped building.

Fana and the tutor stepped off the carriage with a helping hand from the coachman.

The pure white palace towered over them.

The method of creating this wall was taken from the Amatsukami. Instead of mixing sand into lime, their method called for mixing in a special white paper, which would then result in a much purer white than normal. When the building was first made, Duke Diego was exhilarated by the pure white exterior, but upon learning that an Amatsukami construction method was used, became extremely displeased. Those nearby went through great lengths to explain to him that Levahmian methods were used for everything else, and thus he was soothed. But the displeasure on his face was so great that everyone feared he would order the whole building scrapped on the spot.

The tutor led the way into the foyer.

The exterior was simple, but the interior was decorated with the fullest of fervor. That's the Levahmian way.

The foyer was like a night sky, filled with stars.

Looking up, there was a high, circular ceiling painted indigo blue, supported by fulcrums from the side walls. Engravings of angels and stars made of gold were scattered everywhere, and several candle-stands placed on the ground lit everything, making it feel as though the room had no gravity.

They continued down the hallway, greeted silently by excessively clothed butlers standing shoulder-to-shoulder.

The side walls were lined with famous paintings, candle-stands of pure gold, and on the high ceiling, mother-of-pearl woodwork. Be it an architectural necessity or something else, complex linear components blended in as fulcrums to the ceiling.

It was a never-ending flood of luxury. A complete blend of paintings, architecture and sculpture. Should a visitor they step through the wild tints, their senses become paralyzed, and passing through the corridor subconsciously carves into them an awe of the del Moral house. Walking straight forward, toward the library, the tutor spoke

behind Fana.

"I would like to have you read until dinner. Please study Pedro Jimenez' books on economy. You have one hour. I shall question you about the contents after dinner. Understood?"

"Yes."

"Afterward, we shall continue with the piano lesson you failed the other day. After you pass, we'll complete the remainder of the poetry homework. Then you shall bathe, and sleep is scheduled for 11 tonight."

"Yes."

"As obedient as ever."

"Yes."

Fana's response had no color whatsoever. Usually girls of this age were angry or rebellious against such a restrictive schedule, complaining or begging for pity, but it's almost as if such lower-level emotions had been peeled away from Fana. In a way it made her easier to deal with, but at the same time it was unnerving.

She does everything she is told far too indifferently. She was more like an automaton. Maybe it was because she grew up with an unnaturally high amount of scrutiny, resulting in a higher tolerance of restrictions?

The same way deep-sea fish live with the water pressure as their normality, perhaps restrictions and suppression was simply the water she was used to. Her looks were so beautiful it'd suck away your soul, but the shape of her soul might be as grotesquely deformed as deep-sea fish.

In many ways, she was far from a typical student. The tutor inwardly sighed, then opened the door to the library.

With all of her daily lessons completed without interruption, Fana changed into her silk sleeping gown and lay sideways on her bed.

The maids gathered up the clothes Fana had taken off and left the room.

The vast and cold marble floor. The walls of impeccably polished stone. The furnishings lining the walls gave off a scant luster in the darkness. Moonlight, cut out by the decorative rafters, shone through the large, arched window, and along with the slight vibrating sound emitted by the electric fan mounted in the ceiling, stirred the tepid air.

The bed's canopy surrounded it with such a thin, light silk that it felt like blowing just a bit would send everything floating.

This was the only time that Fana could be alone.

Without closing her eyes, with her sheets up to her breast, she stared up at the craftsmanship of the canopy.

Paintings of pegasi flying through stars, layered on top of flocks of angels. It might be the work of a famous artist, but it was quite excessive for something to see as you sleep.

Fana slid out of bed, slipped her toes into a pair of fluffy slippers, and walked to the window. Pressing her forehead into the glass, she looked up at the night sky. The bluish-white moonlight poured over Fana's body, coursing through her un-bound silver hair.

The bamboo thicket outside of the mansion was bending to the night breeze. A full moon hovered over it. Beyond the bamboo thicket was an ocean.

I want to swim, she thought.

Today, on the way to the garden party, she saw the ocean from the window of the carriage. She could see the smiles of the people that had been in the ocean. Everyone looked like they were enjoying themselves.

That was the only memorable thing from today. And she would probably forget, by tomorrow. And as she watches, things that had nothing to do with her would continue occurring.

When did she first begin looking at the world like she was watching an opera?

She couldn't remember. But in the 17 years she'd been living, at some point, she realized there was no relation between the reality she saw in front of her, and her own will.

When she was little, she went to a zoo, with her mother and her two big brothers. There were many rare animals, and Fana especially liked a child elephant. Thinking it'd be nice if she'd be able to play with that child elephant more, she looked up at her mother, and said, "I want to work at a zoo when I grow up." Her mother gave her a stern look, and her two big brothers simply laughed and made fun of Fana.

She couldn't work at a zoo.

At some point, that reality had settled into her heart.

Fana del Moral was born into this world as a trophy for men.

It was decided the moment she was born. Regardless of her will, that was what would happen. The premise, that she was simply a gift, had rooted itself into her, had become her.

Her parents had probably gone through extreme lengths and many tutors to prepare her for this, to make her understand that it was simply the natural thing. Normal people would cause trouble about this, but by the time she'd began formulating thoughts, she'd accepted her status as a gift as the norm.

"I'm a thing," Fana whispered, as she stared at the bluish-white moon.

She didn't feel anything. Not an ounce of pain. Next, she whispered it with her soul.

I'm a thing.

Because she's a thing, she doesn't need to be bound by human emotions. She wasn't the least bit upset.

When she'd come to realize it, the world was already on the other side of a clear glass. Even if she reached out with her hand, the thick, tough glass impeded her way, so that she couldn't grab anything. Eventually she simply stopped reaching out. That's how her current self was made.

But, sometimes, she'd have a strong emotion.

Right, like during today's garden party, when she'd heard that bearded, moderately aged man, Captain Domingo, she was felt anger for the first time in a long while. She'd instinctively reached out to the other side of glass. Of course, the result was an awkward silence and the tutor's lecturing, but she had no regrets.

Why did she defend the Amatsuvian then?

When she thought about it, she thought of an Amatsuvian from deep down in her memories. She had a pockmarked face and was very skinny, a kind-hearted, middle-aged woman who didn't have much going for her in terms of looks. She was a maid for a young Fana, who'd been kind to her.

It was when she was able to sleep in her own room by herself for the first time.

When she lay down on her bed and turned off the lights, the furnishings in the vast room and the designs on the ceilings made the young Fana start crying immediately. But no matter how much she cried, no one would come, so Fana slid out of bed, tossed aside her sheets, escaped from her room and started roaming the halls.

Really, she wanted to go to her mother's room, but she knew she would be scolded severely. If she went to her brothers' rooms they would tell on her and she would be scolded in the morning. Her father's room was far too scary to go to. After all, her strict father was the scariest.

The mansion was so vast, but there was nowhere to go.

Fana simply wandered around the corridor, crying, until she was found by the Amatsuvian maid.

"Oh dear, mistress, you shouldn't be going outside of your room. Master will be angry again," The maid said, with her accented Levahm tongue.

“I'm scared,” said Fana, and then that middle-aged maid who cared not about her looks silently picked her up and hugged her.

"You must be lonely. You're this small after all. You're still the age to want to latch onto someone, right?" The maid said this as she walked down the hall, and then she started crying. Fana was happy that someone would cry for her, and sobbed, with her arms around the maid's neck.

She was carried back to her bed.

She would be in trouble if she were caught, she lackadaisically said, but nevertheless the maid sat down next to the bed and told Fana a certain story, until she slept.

It was a story that was built on the three-thousand year history of Amatsukami.

Fana had never heard a fascinating story like that one the maid told.

Many heroes and beautiful women showed up, hated each other, fought each other, and loved each other.

There were many wars, armies that moved at a dizzying pace, and there were many fighting styles; proud people, unfair people, good people, bad people, people that were neither. They all struggled in their lives, some finding happiness, some being exterminated.

Fana swallowed hard and listened to the story.

She was angered by the selfish actions of the unfair, while moved by the noble actions of the proud. When she asked about things she didn't understand, the maid would break things down for her. The maid was much kinder and warmed than her mother, who was obsessed over social glory. The maid gave her the love her mother would not. Fana ended up longing for bedtime.

Right, because she'd heard such stories, she couldn't stand the Captain's attitude. Amatsuvian are varied, too, and it's not right to just bundle them up as evil, the maid had taught her.

But the stories stopped without reaching the conclusion.

Because one night, she vanished from the mansion.

Wanting to know what happens next in the story, and lonely because a beloved vanished without a word, Fana started crying herself to sleep every night again.

Some day later, she heard the truth from a big brother. Her father had found out that the Amatsuvian maid had been telling bedtime stories to Fana every night, and she was fired on the spot.

She was sad. Very sad.

For the first time, she'd realized that the maid she didn't even know the name of had, every night, risked her job to tell her stories. She was like one of the proud people in the stories, striving to comfort Fana at the cost of herself. And so Fana cried.

She didn't remember when those tears dried away. And as the tears dried, she also stopped feeling strongly about anything. She remembered crying a lot, so she must

have cried a lifetime's worth of tears, and washed away all of her feelings, too.

Gradually, she began looking at everything from a distance, without caring about what she was told, and just accepting everything. She was no longer hit on the back of her hand with a whip anymore, so she probably looked like the Fana del Moral her father desired.

Now, she could even look at herself from a distance.

One year ago, when she'd gone to the Sierra Cadis archipelago for a vacation at the behest of her father, the imperial prince Carlo, who'd been resting there, confessed his love for her. They had met just once at the imperial court's dinner party, but apparently Carlo had become incapable of thinking of anyone other than Fana. The Emperor had no qualms about accepting the Lady of House del Moral into the imperial family. Fana's father of course, the members of the senate people with prominent power or comparable stature, as well as everyone related to the imperial court; all had come to agreement on the arrangement, and thus they brought Fana, who knew nothing, to the imperial prince. Because of the once-in-a-lifetime nature of the event, the imperial prince desired a dramatic scene, and so she was brought out to the romantic southern sea paradise to have love confessed to her. Passionate actions are the specialty of the Levahm people, and it was the Levahm imperial family that strongly encouraged such things.

Fana couldn't refuse.

Even at such a critical point in her life, it felt like the imperial prince was passionately confessing to someone unrelated to her. When she replied the way she was taught by someone, she remembers seeing joy spread across his face.

“Crickets have begun chirping in the imperial city Esmeralda, I want to see you soon. I can't wait for the wedding in a half-year…” was the message Carlo had left her by telegraph yesterday.

Ever since their engagement, Carlo would constantly use the military radio telegraph to send her letters. Fana had never read a letter from him from start to finish. They were forceful, too sweet, and would tire her out in the middle. But even though she wasn't asking for them, the telegrapher would write a response for Fana, then ask for her confirmation. For the most part, they were embarassingly written to please the imperial prince. But she didn't feel like writing them herself. So Fana would always silently nod in confirmation, and the telegrapher would send the sweet, melty letter

12,000 km away to the home country. If the Amatsukami intelligence were to ever break the telegraph code, Carlo and Fana would forever be the laughingstock of their country.

Along with the resignation that had become her flesh and bones, Fana gazed at the hazy moon outside of her window. San Martilia was trying to enter summer.

It was a silent night. The sound of insects you could barely hear every now and then deepened the silence.

Actually— a strange sound was mixed into the sound of insects.

Her intuition immediately told her so.

She pressed her face against the glass.

Fana's eyes were good. She couldn't see it yet, but something was hidden amongst the full moon sky. She could tell that much. She tried focusing more. She could see a black dot, and it was heading toward her.

…A fighter plane?

Something reflecting the moonlight was approaching at an unnatural speed from a low altitude.

The Rio de Este airspace is always guarded by the del Moral Aerial Knights. No barbarian was going to make it through… or so said Fana's father, Duke Diego, as he straightened his back in pride. Those words were about to torn apart in front of her eyes.

The people in the mansion seemed to have noticed the unfamiliar propeller sounds. The workers cleaning the garden had quickly scrambled to hide in tall grass.

One jet-black airplane, darker than the darkness.

No one knew why it was there. It was clearly not a del Moral Aerial Knight. Its wings were bent, and it had no propeller, a bit like a snake. Three of them formed one flock in a triangular formation, and right under them was another four, a flock in a rhombus formation. A total of seven.

The next instant, four planes dropped teardrop-shaped things from their bodies.

The four planes then fired the propellers on their tails at full power, showed their underbellies to Fana, glued to her window, then flew over the mansion with a thunderous roar.

The four teardrops, gliding diagonally through the air, went for the eastern wing of the mansion.

Duke Diego's room.

"*Father*!" Fana screamed, and the four bombs exploded simultaneously at the eastern wing.

The explosion was followed by a crimson flame and a black wall that ripped apart the mansion, and rose into the air.

The tremors reached even Fana, who was on the third floor of the western wing, so much that her knees buckled. She could hear the foundation creaking.

The eastern wing had instantly become hell's furnace. The construction had been flung from the place of impact, laying the thick wooden beams bare, and the blaze flickered as it shimmered red in the night sky. The people in the garden were screaming.

The del Moral house embraced visitors whom entered from the main entrance, with its wings spread. But one of those wings had been cruelly torn off.

"Lady, please escape, it's an attack, an attack!"

The evergreen oak door was violently slammed open, and along with smoke, one butler ran into the room, with no pretense of the usual calm.

"But father, father…!"

He embraced the scattered Fana.

"Please, excuse me."

With Fana embraced, the butler threw himself sideways.

A moment later, a dreadful propeller sound battered against the glass window.

The following three planes had followed the bombers and started gunning the mansion.

Along with the thundering sounds of their firing, thousands of machine gun bullets mercilessly rained down on Fana's room.

The polished stone walls were ground away. Heads of granite sculptures were blown apart. The bullet-riddled bed spat out feathers. Big holes punctured the antique books filling the shelves, and the whole room was filled with swirling powder and broken materials.

The shattered walls, broken lights, smashed furnishings and sculptures danced, glittering, in front of Fana.

It was gunfire meant to cause a fire. The machine gun bullets included incendiaries and explosives, and the curtain covering the bed's canopy quickly began burning. The workers shouting about fires in lower floors could be heard.

"We must escape, quickly."

His white hair stained with the color of blood, the butler, covered with cuts, said this as he helped Fana up. Fana was on the verge of losing herself. Whilst her mind tried to keep up with what was going on, the butler carried her on his back.

The butler ran through the blazing mansion. Candlestands had fallen from the walls and spread the flames. The big candlestand that was hanging from the ceiling of the hall had also had its chain snapped, and was now shattered on the ground. The burning tallow candles further spread the fires, making the carpet burn.

The workers all ran around trying to stop the flames, and screams and shouts could be heard from every direction. A black smog covered everything, and ashen white powder was fluttering down from the cracked ceiling.

What is this? Fana's numb brain asked. Reality was always forcefully coming in from beyond, regardless of Fana's will. All Fana could do is to accept it.

Beyond the glass.

And as always, Fana decided to cut away her own will from reality. Still being carried by the butler, she escaped inside, deep inside the walls of the glass castle… like an extreme coward.

Fana, who'd looked grim up to that point, turned to the emotionless face of a doll. That her father had been targeted, that her room had been riddled with gunshots, that the

mansion was about to collapse, all of it was unrelated to Fana, now.

As if watching an opera, Fana gazed at her crumbling home.

The blood oozing out of the butler's head, the debris obscuring their vision, the soot and smoke, the stabbing, burning smell, all of it was on the other side of the glass. Even if she were to burn to death like this, she was confident she could coolly watch herself die. She didn't think that was sad.

And so, Fana distanced herself from everything. Even the sound died out. Maybe it was because she'd spent so much time building up that thick piece of glass, but Fana even forgot about finding a safe place, and became an inorganic substance, just observing and breathing.

Chapter 2

Even if he was trampled on by people on the ground, he would lose to no one in the sky. That was the pride of private Karino Charles of the del Moral Aerial Knights. Even as a former refugee bestado, he was free as long as he was in control of the stick of an Iris II. There were no social hierarchies in the sky. Only the strong survive. That simplicity was good.

However, even so…this spec difference was too unfair!

Hammering at the throttle to speed up, Charles looked behind him.

Beyond the organic glass windshield was a clear, 4,000 meters of blue sky. But marring the expanse of blue was a single, jet-black plane, chasing him down with calm composure. The sharp nose, the crooked wings, the propeller on its back – Amatsukami Air Fleet's latest single-seat fighter plane, the "Shinden", or True Lightning, that had been unveiled along with the start of the central ocean war.

Charles was piloting the Holy Levahm Empire's pride, a new single-seat fighter plane, the "Iris II." Before the combat began, everyone assumed the Amatsukami air force would be shot down by Iris IIs before they could even see the Great Fall. But upon opening the lid of war, an unpleasant surprise awaited them.

It became clear that it was actually the Levahm air force that couldn't even get close enough to see the Great Fall. Iris IIs couldn't touch Shindens, and the airspace over the Great Fall quickly fell into the Amatsukami Air Fleet's hands. The effectiveness of superior fighter plane fleets in aerial warfare was a harsh lesson taught to the Levahm imperial command.

Armaments, flight distance, maneuverability, top speed, climbing power… the Iris II was inferior in every way. And the gap in inferiority wasn't even close. It was so inferior that current pilots would shed tears of blood in frustration, and bad pilots would instantly give up the moment a Shinden showed up, not even wanting to fly anymore. A certain flight expert remarked that it was as if the Shinden had "skipped two steps ahead in flight technology development." Charles knew first-hand that wasn't an exaggeration. Shindens were faster, quicker at turning, could climb better, and hit harder.

“I can't win!!” Charles spat this out as he kicked the footbar with both feet, bit-by-bit, controlling the stick with his whole body, trying to shake the Shinden. But he could imagine the Shinden pilot just smirking as it looked like the Shinden was casually being pulled toward his tail.

Charles had the pride of being a del Moral Aerial Knight ace. He was confident he was superior to most Levahm pilots, and truth be told, he had utterly demolished a slew of Levahm air force aces. Everyone acknowledged him as the best pilot of San Martilia, Karino Charles.

However, even so, for him to be dominated with such ease!

Charles used his overboost. Using up an enormous amount of his metal-hydride battery, the Iris II, aided by the explosive boost in speed, turned into a climb. There was a thin, silken-thread-like cloud at around 5,000 altitude. He wanted to fly in there and lose his enemy.

He looked behind him. The Shinden followed, after a bit of hesitation. Nodding once and calming his breathing, Charles nosed his Iris II into the cloud.

Cloud flight was the pride of Charles. Most pilots risk airspace ataxia and prefer not to fly in clouds for long, but Charles had the God-given gift of being able to hang onto an invisible horizon, and the skill to maintain according plane control. Passing through the cloud, he saw the blue ocean spread under him.

Did I get away?

When he looked behind, Charles' eyes opened wide.

Unbelievably, the Shinden had managed to come even closer to the Iris II. Not just a bit closer, but so close the Shinden's nose was about to ram the Iris II's tail. Getting as close as possible to take the enemy down in one volley was the ideal of a pilot, but this was too close.

It was like the legendary sword technique of the Amatsukami, the Iainuki. The unavoidable single strike, fired from anything constituting its range, would slice its poor victim in two. Charles' survival instincts slid the windshield back. The outside air rushed in.

They occurred almost simultaneously: the Shinden's 20mm guns on its wings opened fire, and Charles threw himself out of the cockpit with his parachute.

The shattered parts of his favorite plane danced into the late-spring azure. One wing was torn off, and dragging its blazing tail, Charles' plane spun in free-fall down to the ocean.

Biting his lips, he opened his parachute as he fell straight down. After a momentary load on his breast and shoulders, a yellow flower blossomed in the air. It was Charles' first parachute.

The Shinden was swirling around the falling Charles, proud of its handiwork. The enemy pilot was probably rejoicing, gazing at the pitiable sight of the loser. It was so humiliating he felt his brain about to catch fire. He swore he'd never parachute again. If he were to have to taste this much humiliation a second time, he'd rather die.

The Shinden crept closer. It was close enough to make out the pilot. Charles narrowed his eyes, and peered into the cockpit.

The pilot, with feminine features, lorded over Charles, smirking. His neck was covered in a fancy sky-blue muffler. Near the nose of the plane was an illustration of a beagle, as if making fun of people.

"I won't lose, next time." Carving an oath into his brain, Charles muttered out loud. Done gloating over his triumph, the Shinden turned, then left, happily flapping its wings.

Charles shouted after the vanishing plane.

"I'll remember you, Beagle!"

Shouting, he woke up to his own voice.

Groggily opening his eyes, he raised himself. A white, thin sheet had been placed over him. Looking around, he recognized his surroundings as the ever-familiar pilot dormitory. Outside the window was the red-dirt runway of the Almeria airport. He could hear the propeller of a patrol plane in the distance, mixed with the voices of some early morning insects. Sunlight, traced by the window sill, shone onto the hardwood floor.

By the side of the bed, his fellow pilot, Joakhim, was looking at Charles, puzzled.

"Tug of war?" He asked, looking worried.

Forcing laughter and brushing hair away from his forehead, Charles shook his head.

"Dreaming. Of when I was shot down two weeks ago."

"Ahh, that. That's what you get for fighting a Shinden. We've been told not to take them on, you know?"

"I'm regretting it enough. Stop teasing me."

Charles slid out of the wooden bed and did a light warm-up, cracked his knuckles, and changed out of his wood-fiber nightgown into his white flight-suit.

Compared to an Amatsuvian, his facial features were carved deeply, and his eyes were a transparent water-blue. But otherwise, he had chestnut hair and a slender body, with skin that was more light-peach than white. At first glance you would instantly think him a pure Amatsuvian. The reason why he wasn't able to enter the Levahm air force despite his magnificent flight skill was because of the blood running through him. But Charles didn’t hold a grudge against anyone about that. If a bestado were to enter the air force, he'd be subjected to a lot of malice. He was content with being able to fly in a fighter plane as part of the del Moral Aerial Knights. Most of the Knights, after all, were vulgar, rough social outcasts, but they were all light-hearted enough to joke about their own birthplaces and blood as they flew. That sort of atmosphere was a salvation to Charles.

Yawning, he washed his face, then went to the cafeteria with Joakhim.

There was no mission that morning. The early-rising del Moral Aerial Knights were gathered at one side of the cafeteria, eating oatmeal at plain, wooden tables.

The vacant seats stood out blaringly. Half-a-year since war began, the Knights were already halved in number. But no one talked about that. If the moment were to arise, they would gladly give remembrances to their fallen comrades, but in order to stave off grief, it was not a normal topic of discussion.

Taking his portion of the morning meal, he said good morning to his comrades, and pulled out a wooden chair.

On the other side of the cafeteria was a cluster of Levahm air force pilots.

They were allies, but they never really spoke. Mission briefings were done separately, and in most cases, the Knights were simply used as decoys for the air force. That's why their losses were so staggering.

The del Moral Aerial Knights had been created by Duke Diego, using his personal finances, with the blessing of the imperial family. They had the grandiose name of 'knights,' but in truth they were simply a gathering of pilots, regardless of background, thus essentially just a group of mercenaries. Their primary duty had been to fight pirates and escort transportation vessels, but when war broke out, they were shuffled under the command of the air force, and for the most part forced to fly into battle. The air force pilots all looked down on the knights, considering them "soldiers hired by a rustic noble," and despite their sacrifices, garnered no pity.

There were many who shook in anger at being treated as animals. They were mercenaries, so they didn't have any obligation to continue serving the army. But San Martilia was filled with the starving unemployed, so there weren't many kindhearted people willing to employ people who could only fly. Thus, they'd all return, shoulders drooped, for that day's worth of bread.

"Another weird one just came." Joakhim commented. Of late, several high-ranking officials had been arriving in black cars at Almeria, and would have long discussions in the aerial command room.

Swallowing the last of his breakfast, Charles remarked, "Hopefully the imperial prince hasn't come up with another new strategy."

The Knights chuckled. The feeble mind of the emperor-to-be, imperial prince Carlo Levahm, was the source of amusement not just for the Knights, but also for the air force.

"When will the Eighth Special Mission Fleet get here?" Joakhim sighed, neither

serious nor joking, and another chuckle rose from the Knights.

The Eighth Special Mission Fleet had been dispatched eastward.

It would later be written into history books as the beginning of an unprecedented bridal reclamation operation. The story began three weeks before, when the del Moral mansion was violently attacked by seven Shinden.

Duke Diego's viciously burnt corpse was found among the rubble, and the three primary newspapers on the mainland printed the news on the front page.

It seems, they wrote along with the details of the incident, that imperial prince Carlo's fiancée, Fana del Moral, was being targeted by the Amatsuvians. By abducting the young, beautiful Lady from the Levahm imperial family, they would force an indefinite postponement of the wedding; the already-low morale of the Levahm army would be ground down even further, and the imperial court would feel the onset of war-weariness. On top of this, it was only a matter of time before the Amatsukami air force took complete control of San Martilia airspace. To them, kidnapping Fana del Moral was probably like having the enemy's last hopes in their hands. After conquering San Martilia, they could publicly execute her, or send her into a brothel … anything would work.

And it was this article that sent imperial prince Carlo into a rage, his face flushed with anger and desire.

One week after the incident, the imperial prince drew from the seven imperial fleets one aerial warship, three heavy airships, and seven destroyer airships. Forming a new fleet with them and dubbing it the "Eighth Special Mission Fleet," he sent it off to reclaim his beloved fiancée from the crumbling ruins of San Martilia. At their departure, an enormous party was thrown, with applause and cheers sent after the brave warriors.

The Levahm people are well known for their strong passion. The heroic, romantic mission was enthusiastically accepted by the populace, with newspapers printing showy front-page stories that detailed the love of imperial prince Carlo and Lady Fana. The imperial prince, a central figure in Levahmian beauty, personally sent the warriors off to rescue his fiancée with every ounce of zeal he had.

The plan was that the Eighth Special Mission Fleet would break through enemy lines, cross the central ocean in ten days, and arrive at Rio de Este. There, they would pick

up Lady Fana and other high-ranked officials there, turn and break through the enemy lines again. In another ten days, they'd return to the capital city Esmeralda, in time for a grand ceremony celebrating the reunion of imperial prince Carlo and Lady Fana. That was the plan, anyway.

Now, two weeks after the departure of Eighth Special Mission Fleet, and no one received a single word on its whereabouts.

What happened to the Eighth Special Mission Fleet?

A mercenary who loved to gamble made his bet. "300 peseta it never crossed the Great Fall."

Charles didn't respond. It was so obvious it wasn't worth betting on.

There is a limit to how much you underestimate your enemy. The Amatsukami had already deployed their heaviest warships to create a blockade over the Great Fall. Lumbering warships would have no chance of slipping through. And if a skirmish broke out at the Great Fall, flocks of Shinden would be deployed from Awashima and Iyojima, destroying any defenses of the Special Mission Fleet and turning it into scrap.

Warship cannons are no match to the air-to-air thunder of fighter planes. That was common knowledge to most of the world.

They were underestimating the Amatsukami far too much.

There was a great difference in the Imperial Amatsukami that had been defeated by the Holy Levahm Empire 60 years ago and the one that was fighting now. They'd spent the last 60 years furiously advancing their technology, and was now capable of producing parts with not a hint of Levahm influence. The Shinden was simply one of those products.

The reason why we're struggling so much is because the Levahm imperial command is unwilling to acknowledge the vast technological superiority of the enemy, Charles thought.

That was when an officer he didn't recognize, wearing a Levahm air force uniform, called Charles' name from the cafeteria entrance.

Dropping the spoon that was he was bringing to his mouth, Charles stood up on the

spot, snapped his heels together and saluted the officer. According to the insignia on his breast, he was a commander.

"Sorry to interrupt your meal, but there's an emergency. Come with me to the command room."

"Yes, sir."

The air force pilots shot Charles a suspicious look. Some of them didn't even bother hiding their animosity, and outright glared. They weren't amused by a mere mercenary leaping over their official standing and being called by a high-ranking officer. Charles followed the commander, not paying them any heed.

The late-July sky floated above them as they left the dormitory. White, clouds were scattered everywhere, blown by the carefree wind. Sounding its propellers, a patrol plane was calmly cutting diagonally through the blue sky. The bluish-gray cowling reflected the translucent sun-rays.

Contrary to the wooden dormitory, the aerial command building was a sturdily-built two-story building. Large, brown cicadas were resting against the white-painted walls, basking in the warmth.

The Director of the Levahm air force Eastern Battalion, Captain Domingo Garcia, was seated on his leather chair in the command room on the second floor, waiting for Charles. His protruding stomach, his balding head, and the military cap plopped on his head marked the special characteristics of this man.

He glared at Charles, elbows resting on the office table, chin propped on his intertwined hands. Snapping his heels together, Charles placed his right fingertips over his temple in salute.

The commander went to stand by the captain's side, and opened a black notebook. He had an average build and height, and didn't look especially out-standing, but every now and then, he'd throw Charles a very discerning eye from behind his glasses.

Leafing through the profile documents, Captain Domingo lifted his slightly-yellow eyes.

"Private Charles Karino, of the Amadora region. 17 confirmed kills, 0 unconfirmed kills. A strange record."

"It is an honor."

"Do you like matching your recorded kills with the confirmed battle records?"

"No. I simply report it as I see it."

The captain snorted at Charles' response.

The Levahm air force recorded numbers from the battlefield in two ways. One was the pilots' reports themselves, and one was sent from the aircraft observing the battle, and these would be noted down as "confirmed kills as by both pilot and observer" and "kills reported by the pilot but unconfirmed by the observer." Because of this system, some shady pilots would have records of "0 confirmed kills, 17 unconfirmed kills." But Charles was the exact opposite.

He was honest, but he was also a fool. The number of kills dictated the stature of a pilot, and unconfirmed kills weren't just a sham. There're plenty of actual kills that simply occur outside of the observer's vision, which made this a useless honesty for Charles. That's when the commander, staring down at the notebook, asked.

"We highly regard that straight-forward personality, though. We've done a background check, you were raised by a priest of the Aldista Church?"

"I was orphaned when I was nine, and the priest picked me up when I was starving to death when I was ten. While under his care, I was able to find work doing errands around the Almeria airport. I am very thankful to him."

Not knowing why he was being investigated so deeply, Charles tried to hide his worries as he replied.

Charles's father was a homeless seasonal worker; in other words, a refugee. While struggling to survive on the bottom-most rung of Levahm's class system, he ruined his lungs in the coal mines and died. His mother then took the young Charles and used her connections to find work at at a noble's mansion, but after a few years was fired because of an incident. Shortly after, she was killed, stabbed by a masher at a bar. After wandering around Amadora as an orphan, a nearly-frozen ten-year-old Charles was picked up by an Aldista Church priest. It was then that he was able to resume his life.

It was through various lines of work that he began to frequent the Almeria airport, and befriend its pilots. He soon learned how to fly a plane, and then worked towards his

current position, where he was able to fly a plane without a license. There was no lie in what he told the captain; even today, he still sent portions of his salary to the church.

"We recognize that you are a devout believer of the Aldista religion. Is this wrong?"

"I do my best to remain devout at all times."

"Then what do you think of men and women who have pre-marital intercourse?"

Still not knowing where this was leading, Charles answered with a line from the Aldista teachings.

"They fall to hell, to be burned for all eternity."

"Wonderful," Said the commander, apparently satisfied, and looked at the captain, prodding him on.

The captain stood up in an extravagant manner, clasped his hands behind him, and looked out the window. He spoke while facing away.

"Everything you hear from this point on is top secret. No matter the reason, if you tell anyone else this, you will be punished according to military law. Even amongst colleagues, you must not speak of this until granted permission."

"Yes, sir."

The creepy feeling of a confirmed suspicion was touching the back of his mind. He wondered if he shouldn't listen to this after all, but curiosity won out.

"I want to entrust you with an important mission."

With that, the captain turned back to face Charles. This obese bald man liked putting on a show, Charles concluded. Each and every action was done deliberately, and it was beginning to irritate Charles.

Having toyed with Charles to the point where the latter's irritation was bubbling close to the surface, the captain stayed true to the feeling that the enormity of the situation doesn't actually appear until an illogical order is bluntly given. And thus issued from his mouth the most illogical order.

"With the Empress-to-be in your back seat, you are to fly alone through the central ocean and pass through the enemy blockade."

With the order given, the command room fell silent. Only the sound of the four-bladed electric fan mounted on the ceiling could be heard. Charles absorbed the order he'd just been given, doing his best to comprehend it.

The captain, trying his best to maintain his composure, asked, "Can you do it?"

"Huh?"

"You are to deliver the imperial prince Carlo's fiancée to him."

"Uh. Umm."

Charles simply could not understand his captain's order. So he sent a look of plea to the commander.

"This mission was supposed to be carried out by the Eighth Special Mission Fleet. But it was impossible. You can probably imagine what happened, but the Eighth Special Mission Fleet will not be arriving in Rio de Este to receive Lady Fana.

"However the reputation of the imperial prince must be preserved. After all, this was a mission of such magnitude that a grand ceremony was held. The failure of the Special Mission Fleet is not an option. The war-weariness faction would gain enough influence to call an end to the war. Thus, the annihilation of the Eighth Special Mission Fleet must remain a secret until the end of the war.

"Because of this, we absolutely must send Lady Fana to the imperial capital Esmeralda at all costs, and have the triumphant return festival held as planned. Yet, the Eighth Special Mission Fleet obviously cannot carry that out.

"That's where you come in. You will seat Lady Fana in a multi-seat aquatic reconnaissance plane, break through the enemy blockade alone, land on the waters near Cyon island, where there will be a friendly airport, and send a message to the mainland. The mainland will then send an airship to pick up Lady Fana, in secret. As you have probably figured out, this ship will bear the same emblem as the Eighth Special Mission Fleet.

"This ship will then arrive at the imperial capital, the lone survivor of the glorious mission to rescue Lady Fana, and she will be reunited with her beloved imperial prince Carlo. Imperial prince Carlo's Eighth Special Mission Fleet operation will thus have succeeded, and they will live happily ever after.

"Of course, you'll be rewarded well. You'll have enough to enjoy your life three times over. If the operation succeeds, you're free to live wherever you want, however you want. The imperial court will no longer be able to push you around. I'm actually quite envious.

"Harumph. Well, that is the plan hatched with the blood of command and the desire of imperial prince Carlo; the best we can do given the situation. It's an everyone-wins plan. Any questions?"

Though it had harsh realities mixed in, thanks to the kindly broken-down explanation provided by the commander Charles was finally able to understand.

But at the same time his throat became parched as he realized the magnitude of the order. It was so enormous he wanted to sit down.

He choked out his words. "Why are you entrusting this to me, instead of one of the Levahm air force pilots?"

"A good question, from one who understands his position, pilot Charles. The answer is simple. There is no one in our air force that can fly through the central ocean using only the terrain. Not only will you be using a reconnaissance plane, it will also be Lady Fana, not another pilot, in the rear seat. That's why it is important that the pilot can fly across the ocean without using any instruments. You've gone on round-trips across the ocean multiple times, haven't you?"

"Yes. It will be no problem," Charles answered with honesty.

Using the terrain meant relying on landmarks to fly, using the mountains, rivers, birds, and fish as your map. All single-seat fighter pilots fly this way. To fly without using landmarks, you need a navigator with highly specialized training in flight instruments.

As the commander said, del Moral Aerial Knights had flown across the central ocean numerous times before the war broke out. That's why most of the Knights could fly back and forth between the continents without a navigator. On the other hand, the Levahm air force pilots had never flown across the ocean without a navigator, so not one of them could undertake this mission.

On top of that premise, Charles was the del Moral Aerial Knights ace, with 17 confirmed and 0 unconfirmed kills, along with the religious belief that pre-marital sex would lead to eternal damnation in hell. Those were the reasons why Karino Charles was chosen.

"Just to add, upon arrival at the imperial capital, Lady Fana's body will be inspected by the church. If she is not the innocent being she was upon departure, regardless of the success of the mission, you will be executed by gunfire. Any complaints?"

"N-no. The inspection itself is a humiliation of my beliefs."

Seeing Charles's anger, the commander silently laughed, then became serious once more, his eyes glimmering beyond his glasses.

"Can you fly 12,000 kilometers into an enemy squadron, alone, while protecting a beautiful princess?"

Charles hesitated to answer. He quickly planned out a route in his mind, then thought out loud. "It would be difficult, but not impossible. I believe it's a lot more realistic than using a fleet to send one person back to the mainland," He answered honestly, then peered at the commander, to read his face. It looked satisfied.

If you send an entire fleet, complete with a departure ceremony, then of course it'd be discovered by the enemy and annihilated. The enemy wouldn't stop firing until it was eradicated. But placing Fana on an aquatic recon plane and flying secretly, using its superior speed to try and break the blockade, wasn't impossible. As long as you were vigilant, found the enemy before they found you, and fled. Even if the enemy began chasing, it was fast enough to shake them. He couldn't take on a Shinden, but he could run. And Charles, confident in his cloud flight, felt he could shake any as long as a single cloud was in the sky. Plus, contrary to a fleet, it was just one recon plane. The enemy wouldn't send an entire fleet after it. There may be times he's chased by three or four Shinden, but it would just be like warding off a few annoying bees, like play. Of course, if he were to accidentally fly into an enemy fleet preparing for a massive operation, he'd probably be hounded, but there shouldn't be a case of being chased by a rotating set of 30-40 planes, especially not when he's just in a recon plane.

But, there was one sticky point.

"The problem is the aquatic recon plane's properties. At the very least, I'd need

something that can fly at the same speed as a Shinden."

"We know. We'll be using the latest multi-seat aquatic recon plane, the Santa Cruz. Its top speed is 620km per hour. It can travel 3100 kilometers between refueling, and has one 7.7mm machine gun in the back seat. It also has a newly-designed collapsible float. Being able to stow the float away makes it incomparably better than other aquatic recon planes. We couldn't make it match a Shinden in top speed, but it's still one of the fastest planes around. The enemy will struggle to shoot down a Santa Cruz."

Charles nodded. It would take tremendous skill to shoot down a plane using maneuvers at top speed. If the Santa Cruz could actually output the specifications the commander listed, then it increased the odds.

As he talked, a flight path from Almeria airport to the destination, Cyon island, began to take form in Charles' head. The biggest problem would be crossing the Great Fall, as the blockades from Awashima and Iyojima would overlap. If he could get through there without being discovered, this mission would almost certainly be a success.

The Great Fall.

An edgeless waterfall running north-south, splitting the central ocean.

It had 1300 meters in height, with the higher, Western Ocean being connected to Levahm, and the lower one connected to the Amatsukami Eastern Ocean.

Until about a hundred years ago, before airplanes, neither country knew of each others' existence. Because it was impossible for regular ships to go down or up the waterfall, both felt there was no world beyond the waterfall.

When airplanes were invented, it was made possible to fly past the waterfall, and both countries had found each other. The next frontier was finding the "north end and south end" of the waterfall.

Where does the Great Fall end?

This question, asked since the naval era and now a romantic dream of sailors, had still not been solved. So many people had set sail trying to find the answer, and whilst some returned, having run out of supplies in the middle, still others vanished, never to return.

Both the Holy Levahm Empire and the Imperial Amatsukami, having spent vast

amounts of money in this venture, concluded that "there are only the east and west continents on this world. Other than these there is only an endless sea and a waterfall with no end," which is a very useless conclusion. And with no conclusion to the world's truth, both powers began waging war on each other.

At the same time, because of this enormous quest, the technology to power airplanes was invented. The "metal hydride battery" was used by everything that flies. This battery was not just able to store energy, but able to create it.

They say a certain alchemist invented the metal hydride battery.

For three days and nights he poured ocean water into a box that contained various chemical substances and liquids, to split the hydrogen from oxygen. He then used reverse electrolysis, to create small currents in the two metal rods sticking out of the box.

At first, people around him considered it a nice street trick. Alchemists were alchemists because they were to create gold out of mud, so what was the point of making fireworks out of ocean water, they laughed.

But one investor heard rumors and came to the alchemist, wanting to see it in action, then almost fell over in shock. Everything began to change, as the investor paid an exorbitant sum to buy this invention, then created a company that both used and sold products using the metal hydride battery.

That's when the world moved from the steam age to the industrial revolution.

After all, electricity was being made from ocean water. The materials needed to make the battery itself were expensive, but as long as you made it, you no longer needed to fund a power source.

Steam power, which was used until then, vanished instantly, replaced worldwide by this "metal hydride battery."

Nowadays, most airplanes simply refuel the batteries over the ocean. And now there were even some ships that took off the floats, not bothering to refuel over the ocean, like the Shinden. But because most combat took place over the ocean, ships with floats still constituted the majority of air fleets. They were less effective in combat, but even if you got lost, you would be able to refuel.

Charles' mission, too, was based on simply lowering the floats to refuel the metal

hydride batteries. Santa Cruz would go at least 3000 kilometers between refueling, so at the very least he'd need at least four nights to refuel.

Charles realized he was already planning out how to make the mission succeed. When he looked up, he found the commander amused by Charles's furious thinking.

"Do you want the mission?"

Again, Charles hesitated before answering. It was too heavy a mission for him. With the light of hope of the empire seated behind him, if he were to be shot down, there'd be nothing he could say.

After a long silence, he opened his mouth. "May I have time to think about it?"

"But we only have you."

"It's too heavy a task for a mercenary."

"I consider you a proud, trustworthy pilot. Your background doesn't matter."

"I am honored. However... I'm also a timid person whose legs trembled upon hearing this mission. Please let me think about it over the night. I'll have decided by tomorrow morning."

The commander looked at Charles' legs. The two slender legs were trembling just a bit. With the mission fully understood, the weight was bearing down on him.

"I'm hoping for a good response. I'll say it again, you're all we have."

Charles looked relieved at the commander's response. After being reinforced about remaining silent, Charles was let out of the command room.

With Charles gone, left alone, Captain Domingo glanced to the commander at his side.

"Well, he is as stupidly clean as you said."

"He's also very skilled. Him being young and single is an issue, but he meets all the conditions for the imperial family's approval."

"Even so, no matter how skilled he is, to have to send the future empress with a

refugee bestado through an enemy blockade … what has the world come to?" Captain Domingo spat this out, then sighed.

As the Captain said, even though San Martilia was on the verge of ruin, it was still an audacious, unprecedented plan.

Roughly 700 years since the country was founded. The Holy Levahm Empire, from its founding to the present, adhered to a strict social class system, where the ruling family dominated the hierarchy.

Charles was born as a refugee, a class that wasn't even a class – regardless of his profession, he was destined to be discriminated against his whole life.

Refugees were technically part of the working class, but even amongst the working class there were divisions and severe inequity. Those who were part of this class could only rely on their physical bodies to make a living. Most jobs were in the worst of conditions and were hard labor. Pay was used for food and possibly shelter, with almost no possibility of any sort of luxury. The current working class was pretty much fated to be bought up by capitalists.

Above them was the middle class, or the citizens. Their jobs were based around production, maintenance, and merchandise, where they bought and sold others' products for profit. It was a social class that had been necessary of late. There were hundreds of divisions even in this class. With a hierarchy even amongst the store owners, each would have to disdain or look up to people of different levels. They're called the middle class, but that was really just a generalization of a big cloud of professions and hierarchies, with a strict adherence to the relationships generated by them.

The classes above the middle class were far fewer in number. This was the domain of those surrounding the Emperor, the class of nobles. Clinging to the principles of vested rights, it was a class rife with conflict. Lower classes had to be abused in order to further their own power, lest they be displaced by another.

And lastly, at the top was the Levahm imperial family – this was the class Fana was to enter. The imperial family held veto rights to every meeting, and was the only class with the power to wield a military. Their monopoly of armed forces was the cog to their strength, as they were able to control when, where, and how violence could be placed. During war, they are able to draw from every standing military unit, which is what made it possible to arbitrarily form a new special unit, though it was a

historically foolish move.

Overall for good or for bad, the imperial family had power rivaling that of God. To the empire, treating the imperial family as divinity wasn't an exaggeration.

And so it was that Fana del Moral, on the brink of ascending to divinity, would need the help of a refugee bestado to survive, a scenario produced by such an era – and that was why Captain Domingo was vexed.

The commander simply viewed the class structure as highly repressive but perhaps a necessary evil due to tradition. With his middle-class background, though, he could not speak his mind. However he did feel pity for Charles who, despite being so skilled, was unable to enter the Levahm air force simply because he was a bestado.

For the rest of the day, Charles soothed his curious colleagues, suffered the jealous stares of the Levahm air force, and spent the rest of his time in complete silence.

Eventually, when moonlight lit the lukewarm air and the crickets stopped chirping, Charles snuck out of the dormitory to walk under the full moon.

He was too anxious to sleep. Living up to the weight of his role was something he wasn’t confident about, although for a pilot, it was a very tempting mission. That it wasn't a normal killing mission, but a mission to save a life, made it especially so. But if he failed, there would be no going back. There were other pilots more skilled than he, so maybe they should be entrusted with the task-

Cradling an agony without an answer, he covered his wood-fiber gown with a red blanket and walked the midnight runway. The red dirt under his heel no longer had the noon's warmth.

He lit a cigarette in the middle of the runway. A spinning numbness ran through his mind. Feeling a comfortable dizziness, he blew smoke toward the sky, and indulged in his memories.

During his conversation with the officers, there was something he didn't tell them. He had braced himself for the question, but apparently they hadn't been able to dig into his childhood.

Looking up at the reddening moonlight, Charles retrieved that memory from his heart. He'd watched it so many times during his rough childhood that its taping was probably

frayed and beat up. Come to think of it, it was summer then, too.

Green grass that had soaked up plenty of August sunlight, and a field of sunflowers.

The del Moral mansion's garden was as vast as a city with a forest and a small river, and even had a rough sentry house for the patrols.

Young Charles lived in that house, while his mother was a maid at the mansion.

Every day, Charles worked on the grass, the garden trees, and the flowers with the elder gardener, clearing the walkways.

With an overwhelming number of tasks, he could only see his mother once a week, and the gardener was also quite mean. Because he was a bestado, he could play with neither the Levahmian children nor the Amatsuvian children, so his only friend was the pig in the animal pen.

One day, the gardener had been particularly cruel, so Charles ran out of the sentry house, hid in the animal pen, and hit his pig friend with a branch. Why did he have to go through this? He didn't want to be a bestado or a refugee. He wanted to be reborn as a citizen. While crying like that, he picked on the pig. The pig ran out of the pen, crying, and escaped to the grass field in the middle of the garden.

As Charles chased after it, still crying, a girl got in the way.

"Why are you picking on the pig?"

It was a little girl with silver eyes and hair, wearing a pure white one-piece. Her shoes and socks were spotless, and she was so cute it was like she'd been cut out of a picture book.

Behind her was a field of sunflowers, and the spread of yellow petals swayed in the wind, with dancing butterflies frolicking amongst them.

The translucent eyes looked at Charles straight-on.

"Are you crying?"

"What?"

"Was the pig picking on you?"

"No."

"Then why are you crying?"

"Not crying." Charles quickly rubbed away the tears.

The girl admonished him. "You shouldn't be picking on the poor pig."

Charles knew who the girl was. He felt embarrassed about his ragged wood-fiber shirt, his dirtied worker's trousers, the cloth shoes that didn't cover his toes.

"Are you lonely?"

"Huh?"

"You're crying because you're lonely, aren't you?"

"No, that's... not it." Charles fidgeted as he answered.

The young Fana del Moral looked at him suspiciously, stooping her head under his.

"What do you want to play?"

"Huh?"

"Okay, let's play tag. You're it. Ready, go!"

Tat tat tat, and away Fana ran. Charles stood there dumbfounded, watching her small back.

Fana waved a hand from the forest. Turning to the dumbfounded Charles, she puffed her cheeks.

"Come on, chase me, or it's no fun."

Surprising himself, Charles chased after Fana, hands stretched out in front of him.

Squealing happily, Fana ran away, Charles behind her with his clumsy plodding. When he finally brushed that small back, they heard an adult's voice from far away.

"Mistress, Mistress Fana-!"

Fana responded to that voice in a surprisingly unhappy voice. Then she turned those big, silver-white eyes at Charles.

"Sorry, I hafta go."

"O-Okay."

"Promise me you won't cry anymore."

"Okay."

"Even if you're lonely, don't do anything bad. Okay?"

"Okay."

Fana smiled happily, reached out with both of her hands, and embraced Charles.

He could feel Fana's warmth. And beyond his apprehension, he learned affection.

For some reason, Charles felt like crying again. But he'd just promised to not cry anymore, so he held it back.

His heart raced. Fana's scent was comforting to his nose. Charles felt an emotion he'd never felt before.

After a moment, Fana let go, looked at Charles again, smiled, and ran out of the forest. When he looked at the grass outside of the forest, he noticed tutors breathlessly running towards her. It seemed she'd escaped from lessons to take a walk outside the mansion.

In the end, that was the first and last time he'd met Fana. After a short period, Charles' mother was fired because she'd gone against the Duke's orders, and the two were forced to wander the streets. Then his mother was stabbed for no reason, died, and Charles would later be picked up by a priest as he lay freezing to death.

The church's duties weren't easy, and class discrimination continued. Humiliation and contempt on a daily basis was tough to deal with. But he cheered himself up with memories of Fana, whenever he felt down. After all, a girl from such a high rung of the ladder had consoled a person like him, all the way at the bottom, and embraced him like a saintly mother. It gave him incomparable warmth. Because of it, he was able to become a pilot, instead of stepping out of the world of civilization.

That was the only memory he had of his childhood. He'd left all the cruelty behind, only leaving the scent of sunflowers and the warmth of Fana engraved in his heart.

He inhaled deeply from the mostly burnt-out cigarette, and blew out. The red smoke, absorbing the moonlight, vanished into the night. Soaking in the sweet, comfortable sentimentality, he toyed with the horrible-tasting cigarette.

"It's become much clearer," He whispered.

He'd read in the newspaper that that tomboy girl had become engaged to the imperial prince Carlo. The photo of Fana, who he'd not seen in over ten years, was blinding. She was so beautiful he did a double-take, finding difficulty believing that something could remain unsoiled in such a dirty, disgusting world.

If I can, I want to help her.

If he had to live the life of a sewer rat, and was destined to die in the sky like garbage, then just once, he wanted to accomplish a task he could be proud of. If he could rescue Fana de Moral, who'd saved him when they were young, wouldn't that be something to take pride in?

When he falls through some sky as a ball of fire, wouldn't he be able to say his life wasn't one filled only with regrets?

Chapter 3

Though it was still the dark before dawn, the del Moral Aerial Knights were in good humor as they gathered in the briefing room, a rarity for the Almeria airport flight command. The mercenaries of the sky, despite using the same facilities, were usually sparsely mixed into the mob of the Levahm air force with despondent looks. This time, though, they looked satisfied and active, actually eagerly waiting for their launch orders.

On the other hand, the Levahm air force, packed into the same briefing room, looked depressed.

The mission details had been announced last night. Pilot divisions were posted, and everyone discovered that only Charles was headed in a different direction. It was the ranked officials themselves who explained that the imperial prince's fiancée, Fana de Moral, would be riding behind Charles in a multi-seat recon plane.

The Aerial Knights shouted in joy for Charles, while the Levahm air force harbored only resentment. For the air force pilots sent from the mainland, this was just another layer of misfortune. Because the airways were cut off at the central ocean, there were no reinforcements from the mainland, and the number of pilots and ships stationed here were in steady decline.

Now, the morning's mission was to escort Karino Charles, someone they'd made a point to make light of in their daily routine -in effect, they were to be decoys for him. In contrast to the excitement of the mercenaries, their glum faces weren't too surprising.

All the murmuring came to an abrupt stop when the Director of the Levahm air force Eastern Battalion, Captain Domingo Garcia, brought his aide into the briefing room. Everyone looked at the scouting reports held by the officer.

He read aloud the report from the night reconnaissance plane.

"The destination airspace, Takatsuka air base, is sunny, cloud altitude of 3000 meters, 3 or 4 in cloud density, and roughly 15 kilometers of visibility. No obstructions to a noon raid."

The Aerial Knights exulted, while the air force clicked their tongues. Only the weather was a worry for this mission, but even that was fine. Captain Domingo jutted out the silver emblem on his breast as he addressed everyone.

"Flight divisions are as yesterday! Air superiority corps will launch now, direct escort and bombing corps will launch 15 minutes after the air superiority corps. Don't forget! All of you are Lady Fana's decoys. This operation is to force every enemy plane from Rio de Este to you. Hold your ground in combat for even a second longer; show them the pride of the Levahm air force!"

Roaring in response, the 21 air superiority pilots ran out of the briefing room.

After watching them exit, Captain Domingo shuffled toward Charles, belly flopping.

"Lady Fana has already arrived. She's waiting at the eastern edge of the runway. Come with me, black-tailed gull," He gravely ordered. Charles stood and followed the captain. Incidentally, "black-tailed gull" was Charles' code-name for the mission. The operation was simply called "Operation Black-tailed Gull".

"Don't forget. Normally you wouldn't even be allowed to see her face. Don't say anything useless. Don't look in her eye. I'll introduce you. Keep your mouth shut. If she asks you anything, answer with either 'yes' or 'no.' Understood?"

"Yes, sir."

He was used to this sort of treatment, so he responded frankly. As they walked on the red-dirt runway, on Charles's left and right the air superiority fighters had already started their engines.

He saw the operators running around, through the sand and dust being raised by the explosive rumbling of the propellers.

Stratus clouds stretched out low in the eastern sky, their underbellies tinted red. It would soon be sunrise.

The streamers set up along the runway all shook their tails northwest-ward.

The thick odor of metal hydride gas blown out of the engines mixed with the summer morning wind tickled Charles' nose. The smell was enough to pump any pilot's adrenaline.

The rumbling of an entire fleet of fighter planes made the earth tremble. The explosive sound emitted from the Armelia airport was music to Charles' ears. The remaining strength of San Martilia would fly out this morning to help Charles.

Passing by Charles' side was three Iris II's in a triangle formation. Dashing down the runway, they left behind the "*ooon*" shriek of propellers as they launched toward the east.

With barely any room for air, another formation of three followed. Their noses were pointed toward an enemy air base, set up near the border. The aim was to raid in the morning, and force aerial combat in enemy airspace. In the meantime, Charles, with Fana seated behind, would secretly fly the opposite direction, to the northwest.

The red sun began to rise from the east. The blazing, inflamed color began to spread from the horizon.

It seemed like the Iris II's taking to the air flew into a red backdrop. They engraved their refined, cross-shaped shadows into the sky, leaving behind only a mournful echo as the sound of their propellers became distant.

And then...the empress-to-be, Fana del Moral, dressed in an Aerial Knights flight suit, was standing by the side of the runway.

While walking, Charles narrowed his eyes against the light behind her.

The summer morning sky had turned into a frame that outlined Fana's figure.

Her tied, silver hair looked like glossy silk, reflecting the red sunlight, and it looked as if it was placed carefully on top of a frail body that was a bit hunched in grief. It was such a white, transparent, and momentary appearance that it felt just blowing in her direction would make her turn to dust and disappear into the background.

There was no blaming the imperial prince for having his soul whisked away with one look. Her beauty could even be called intimidating. By Fana's side were some authorities from the del Moral house.

Each of them wrapped themselves in an elegant tailcoat, and surrounded Fana with stern looks on their faces. They were directing these looks to Charles, but it also looked as if they were surrounding Fana to keep her from escaping.

And behind the tailcoats were seven, eight servants. Each of them held big, wooden

travel cases.

The captain stepped forward quickly, then straightened and snapped his heels in front of Fana. After giving a worn and customary greeting, he pointed to Charles, at his side.

"This is private Charles Karino, who has been chosen for this mission."

As Charles raised his head, he straightened his back, snapped his heels together, and touched his right fingertips on his temple.

Fana stood within Charles' eyesight. But she was looking somewhere distant, and not at Charles.

She was tomboyish and headstrong when they were kids, but the Fana that stood before him now was no different than a puppet. Her eyes had no life. Perhaps the society of nobles had sucked the humanity out of her, the same way horses are blinded. He couldn't see any resemblance between the young Fana in his memories and the girl in front of him.

After one look at Charles, the tailcoats sent a glance of consternation at the captain. The captain made a sign with his hand. Go. After another salute, Charles ran toward the Santa Cruz by himself. Behind him, the tailcoats and the captain were engaged in some discussion. His partner for the black-tailed gull operation, the multi-seat aquatic reconnaissance plane, Santa Cruz, greeted Charles in the morning light with its brand new body.

Designed for flying above water, the top half was ultramarine and the bottom half was an ashen silver. The straight, smooth, low wings looked awe-inspiring under the clouds, and that gave him confidence. The glass covering the windshield over the seats had also been polished. And under the body, the new floats had been folded and tucked.

The mechanics were doing final inspections of the top of the wings, the cowlings, the metal hydride stack, the backup battery device, the metal hydride tank inside the plane, and other things. After giving a light greeting to the lead mechanic, he received a few words of advice about how to handle the plane.

Being the top of the line, it was a plane Charles had never stepped on before. The same designer had also done the Iris, so most of the controls should feel the same, but he'd spend the next ten days memorizing little things like the rate of metal hydride

depletion and the fingerboard details.

Charles was extremely fond of the ship. Even though it was an aquatic ship, it had similar properties as the Iris II. He also liked that it didn't have many forward guns, it being a recon plane. He didn't need killing weapons for this mission.

There was, however, a 600-bullet magazine just in case, for the backseat machine gun. It wasn't like Fana would shoot it, but because it was highly likely they'd be chased, it would be prudent to at least have some bullets to implant some fear. With those, enemies wouldn't be able to settle in comfortably behind him.

The servants then walked to the Santa Cruz and began shoving the big suitcases into the body. There'd been space for travel necessities planned out beforehand, but they'd brought far too much. The mechanics glared at the servants in irritation, then secured them to the body using wires.

Of course, once away from the area it was his responsibility, so he could just throw away everything that was unneeded. Charles couldn't wait to lift off. As soon as the head mechanic announced everything was good to go, he jumped on the wing and slid into the cockpit.

With the windshield open, he glanced over the dashboard, inspecting everything for problems. After playing with the control stick and foot bar to confirm the dials, he cast his eyes to the surface.

The del Moral house inhabitants slowly walked to the Santa Cruz, and Captain Domingo climbed on a wing. Hurried onward by the send-off, Fana borrowed the captain's hand, and struggled with her balance as she stepped onto the Santa Cruz' wing.

Fana and Charles' eyes met for an instant. As before, there was nothing in Fana's eyes. No nostalgia toward the place she was born, no sadness at having to leave people close to her, not even fear at the journey that was about to begin. Just nothing. The liveliness that should be expected in an 18-year old girl was completely carved out of Fana.

Fana once again borrowed the captain's hand to slide into the rear seat. Because the seats were set in place, you couldn't look behind you during a fight.

The pipe seating that Fana was leaning against and the seating of Charles were the

same. If Charles lifted himself just a bit out of his seat and turned around, he'd bump into the back of Fana's head. They were so close that if the engine weren't on, they might even be able to feel each others' pulses.

Then, the captain stuck his bald, bearded face into the front cockpit. He glared at Charles with his yellow-ish eyes.

"I'm begging you, black-tailed gull. My career's on the line."

"I'll do my best."

"Mmhmm. To help your condition, take this with you."

The captain took a bottle of brandy from a ground crew-member, then pushed it onto Charles' chest. Charles glanced at the label; it was a very famous, expensive brand.

"Don't drink too much."

After patting Charles' shoulder once, and making sure Fana had put on her seat-belt, the captain jumped back onto the ground.

Charles lowered his flight goggles, stuck out a hand from the still-open windshield, and motioned to the ground crew.

"Clear the front! Staff on alert!"

The mechanics scattered from the front of the Santa Cruz. The battery stack sucked metal hydride from the metal hydride tank and oxygen from the air to create energy, and the resulting electrical energy powered the propeller engines.

He could feel the comfortable vibration over his body. The clean vibration of the engine told him the machine was in fantastic state. Through it he could feel that the good mechanics had spent all night preparing everything.

He glanced over the dashboard again. Voltage gauge, electrical power gauge, gas pressure gauge, rotation gauge, no problems.

Charles picked up the voice pipe, and spoke to Fana for the first time.

"Are you ready, my Lady?"

There was no answer. When Charles turned his neck to look, he saw Fana picking up the voice pipe next to her seat.

"Yes."

Politeness and indifference were intermingled in the mechanical, cold reply that came through the voice pipe. They could hear each other even without a voice pipe during flight if they raised their voices, but using it was the most convenient way to communicate.

"I will begin lift-off then. No parting words?"

"No."

As Charles had been told earlier, maybe Fana was also ordered to "only answer yes or no." Ending the curt conversation, he motioned with his hands to take off the landing wheel.

The recon plane Santa Cruz slowly entered the runway. Charles saluted the officers and mechanics, lined up to the side.

Even the airport crew that had nothing to do with planes lined up to send Charles off. Inside the air command, the officers other than the captain were stood by the glass window, saluting. The sun, poking its face out of the clouds, stained their faces red and burned their images into Charles' eyes.

The Santa Cruz strolled down the runway, and reached the designated spot.

Good for lift-off, the runway flag from the ground crew said.

Holding down the break, he fired the engine. The plane shook harder.

Lowering the rudder, and letting down on the breaks, he started moving the throttle. The plane entered the lift-off runway. He switched the engine to full power. As the plane sped up, it ran across the red-dirt runway, with violent vibrations.

He straightened the course of the plane, following the direction of the propeller by holding his leg against the control stick, and holding the check helm to the right.

Wind curled around each wing. Slowly, power to lift the plane gathered. He could hear the sound of wind cutting by his ears.

Checking the feel of wind, he lightly pulled the control stick toward him. He could feel the weight of the wind's pressure against the two hands gripping the stick.

He could feel the air around him, becoming one with him. Charles leaned into that air.

Wind surrounded the plane. Charles could feel the Santa Cruz' words through the stick, I can fly, now.

"Let's go, then," He whispered, and he pulled the stick to him.

Then, without any sound, the wheels separated from the ground.

The world under the wheels lost its speed. The ground, whipping by so quickly just a moment ago, disappeared. Only the burning sky was in front of the windshield.

The body continued upwards, diagonally, cutting through the world's gravity. The violent vibrations stopped, and the howling sound of the propellers became distant.

If you were to turn around, you would see the world becoming distant. The further it became, the slower it moved by. The silhouette of air command disappeared, becoming embedded into the ground. And then the airport became smaller, like a child's toy, until it was sucked into the red-dirt ground.

The Santa Cruz left the ground behind as it climbed into the sky.

Rio de Este, wounded by days of bombardment, could barely be made out from the rear, but that, too, quickly got sucked up by the earth.

A comfortable G covered his body. Lightly shifting the control stick, he coaxed the nose, still rising, to the west, and settled the plane parallel to the horizon at 4,000 meters' altitude.

Closing the windshield, glancing once more over the dashboard to check for problems, Charles smiled to himself in relief. It was a pure smile that he'd never show anyone on the ground.

Only the sky, clouds, and his ship.

Charles loved flying through the sky.

Flying through the sky. He could feel at peace with such a simple thing. No matter how

much he was stomped over on the ground, none of it mattered once he got here.

The endless color of sky that stretched out in front of him, and the darker colors above him that would feel like they're sucking him in when he looks up, that infinite bosom embraced Charles, Fana, and the Santa Cruz. Everything that crowded up Charles' heart was filtered out by the sky, and his soul was cleared by the flawless clarity. The sense of security, of returning home after a depressing ordeal, floated up from inside him.

If it were peacetime, it would be a calm five days and four nights to the Levahm Empire. But it was wartime. The skies over the eastern ocean were covered with the Amatsukami air fleet. He couldn't let down his guard.

The two things key to the success or failure of this trip meant staying alert: to find the enemy before being found, and to quickly escape. That's why he was flying alone.

Charles picked up the voice pipe, and called to Fana.

"My Lady, please keep watch over the back. If you see something shining in the sky, please let me know immediately."

"Okay."

"During flight I'd like if you kept watch, rather than sleep. There's a lunchbox under the seat, so if you become hungry, go ahead by all means."

"Okay."

For the two weeks prior to launching, Fana had received G-resistance and look-out training, so he could probably trust her to a certain extent. Her eyesight was also 1.5 in both eyes, so that was quite comforting. Keeping watch wasn't something that differed much between veterans and newbies. Actually, veterans may be so accustomed to the job that they lose their concentration and slack off more, so some pilots actually prefer newbies who would be too afraid to lose focus.

Charles placed the voice pipe back to the side of the cockpit, and re-gripped the stick. Keeping watch over the front was Charles' job, so he had to keep watching the sky without letting up. Cloud density four, visibility roughly 10 kilometers. After scanning over the horizon, he then scanned under it. After confirming his first check in front, he turned around and confirmed the sky behind him. He'd entrusted Fana with keeping look-out behind him, but he still felt more comfortable checking with his own eyes.

The sun eventually rose fully into the sky, and the indigo blue of the ocean beneath them became darker.

Briefly scowling at the compass, Charles adjusted their direction, and they began calmly flying north-west. Fana, sitting in the back seat, said nothing. There were no enemy ships, enemy planes nor shadows. It was a disturbingly silent departure.

Chapter 4

Numerous clouds came from behind, flew by Fana's side, and vanished beyond her sight.

This wasn't Fana's first flight. She'd crossed the central ocean in aerial cruise ships three times before.

But this time she wasn't seated in a comfortable chair, looking down at the sea of clouds through elaborate windows with a cup of tea in her hand. Instead, she was stuffed into a cramped seat, traveling backwards, and had to keep vigil over every speck in the sky, without sleeping. How did things come to this?

Her brothers and caretakers had all explained, but she hadn't listened. After all, events would occur regardless of her will, so there was no need to listen. At the very least, she was escaping from Rio de Este and flying to the Levahm imperial capital Esmeralda on orders of the imperial prince Carlo. She knew that much, and that was enough for her.

Last night, the imperial prince had sent her another letter through the military radio telegraph. The abbreviated version of the five sweetly worded pages was that he was praying for her safety. According to the letter, he'd been against Fana being forced into cramped spacing until the bitter end, and he felt for her, having to endure such conditions for five days. As always, she hoped the Imperial Amatsukami wouldn't break the codes.

The screeching of the wind was close. Every now and then, the windshield would rattle, making a loud noise. Beyond that thin pane of glass was the sky, and that scared her.

The pilot, controlling the plane with his back against hers, was a quiet person.

Other than some words of caution upon launching and take-off, he didn't say anything, focusing on flying.

Fana appreciated the distancing. Whether she reached the mainland safely or was shot down on the way, she wanted to be able to silently accept her fate. There was no point

in trading meaningless words.

Fana kept focusing her silver-white eyes on the blue sky.

She'd undergone training for two weeks, learning how to keep watch. Below the plane, in the clouds' shadows, near the sun. She shifted her eyes over all the places planes could hide. Nothing abnormal. She didn't really want to be shot down, so she was concentrating as much as possible.

The Santa Cruz was flying heart and soul to the northwest.

In the early hours, the sun, in front of Fana, had caught and passed the plane, and moved diagonally past Fana. Now the plane was chasing after the falling sun.

Then, the sun began to cloud over.

The sunset from 4,000 meters in the sky was breathtakingly clear.

Below them was just an ocean covered with red, and clouds like cotton candy of the same color. Further below ocean birds flew in formation, easily passed by the plane.

Beyond the windshield were clouds she felt she could touch if she were to simply reach out, and countless numbers of ragged clouds, tinged brass and with complex shading, disappeared into the horizon of Fana's view.

It was an otherworldly sight. The colors, lighting, the movement of the earth, all of it was so masterful and perfect that even del Moral's best designers and craftsmen couldn't contend.

Every time the plane went through a cloud, the back-drafts from the propeller sliced up the silhouettes of clouds, spraying droplets behind it as it cut through the whitecaps.

"How beautiful," She whispered impulsively. The small words vanished behind the plane, aided by the speed of their movement, and never reached the front of the plane.

Then, she smelled a ticklish scent from the front seat. The pilot in the front seat had opened his lunchbox. The scent of scrambled eggs and mayonnaise and lettuce. Just as she thought that smelled tasty, she could hear the voice pipe.

"I'm going to grab a meal. Have you already eaten, Lady?"

Fana picked up her voice pipe. The servants had told her to only respond in "yes" or "no," so she did as told.

"No."

"Are you feeling motion sickness?"

"No."

"If you're not, you should eat. Otherwise you'll run out of power. Eat, even if you have to force yourself to."

"Okay."

That was the end of the conversation.

As told, Fana took the lunchbox and flask from under her seat.

Watching the sunset, she ate the sandwich.

She munched. It was delicious. When she finished one, her stomach felt even more empty, so she quickly ate the next.

She definitely had more of an appetite than when she was on the ground. Normally she wasn't able to taste her food, as she was always watched by etiquette tutors, to make sure she was eating with knife and fork. They even complained about how the way she chewed, so she didn't have any time to enjoy the food.

But here, where no one was watching, she finally learned that eating while watching a beautiful scene was this splendid.

She brought the flask to her mouth. That was when a question popped into Fana's mind.

Where do you do your business?

If it were an opera house you would simply stand up and go to a restroom, but in this case, there was nothing of the sort. Just the sky, ocean, clouds, and this plane.

Fana slowly turned her neck and glanced at the front seat. With no trace of awareness of her, the pilot was munching away. It felt embarrassing to need to ask, so she turned

back around without a word.

For now, she wouldn't think about anything, decided Fana.

Darkness was slowly appearing on the surface of the ocean. The radium on the dashboard was beginning to light up. With no navigator in Operation Black-tailed Gull, there would be no night flight, so regardless of remaining power, the setting of the sun signified the end of the day's journey.

Charles, as always, checked the front and back of the plane, glancing left, right, up and down while controlling the plane. Roughly 3,000 kilometers in one day's flight. During the whole thing he had to stay sharp, and by the time he landed on the ocean he'd be too tired to do anything else. After touching down and eating an evening meal, he'd immediately fall to sleep.

But, something abnormal popped into view of his tired eyes.

"— hmm?"

Down and right, there was something glimmering below the horizon. He focused his vision. His trained, experienced eyes could see planes in the sky even over 1,000 meters away.

He could barely make out something seemingly in flight. It was roughly 12,000 meters away in horizontal distance. And it was about 1,000 meters below the Santa Cruz, flying at 4,000 meters altitude in the opposite direction.

And it wasn't just one. Two, three new specks of light were on either side of the most visible source of light. Charles carefully controlled the rudder, shielding himself with the scatterings of clouds to get in position to better identify the specks of light.

"Enemy fleet."

Far ahead was an enemy mobile fleet centered around an Amatsukami aerial carrier. Focusing his sight even more to check everything, he saw the enemy was in a circular formation around the carrier. The shadows of the ships were visible thanks to the red ocean. Judging from the silhouettes, there were four heavy airships and eight destroyer airships. A true full fleet. And they were directed toward Rio de Este, where Charles had come from. Probably to start another bombardment.

They were big enough that it was easy for him to discover. They probably hadn't seen him yet. There was no need to get unnecessarily close. If he had a radio specialist behind him, he would have contacted Almeria airport, but unfortunately Fana didn't know how to code messages. So all Charles could do was get away from the fleet without being noticed.

Charles used the scattered clouds to hide himself from the enemy fleet's view. They were distant enough that it wasn't really that scary. Comfortably, he flew into clouds, popped out into the blue, then flew back into the clouds. The enemy fleet never noticed, and disappeared into the darkness behind him, toward the east.

He placed a hand over his heart. He was able to avoid combat. Not a bad start.

But as a pilot, Charles had a bad feeling. The enemy fleet was using the peace-time flight path. Would a fleet looking to bombard a city go straight through the open like that...?

That's when he imagined something sickening.

What if, for instance, the enemy knew about Operation Black-tailed Gull because they'd broken the transmission codes? The Amatsukami would send entire fleets on a mission to kill the empress-to-be. Perhaps the fleet they'd just passed was covering the flight paths, looking for the Santa Cruz?

Charles shook away that dreadful thought. It's alright, it couldn’t be. The military command claimed proudly that a thousand brilliant mathematicians wouldn't be able to break their code. And to add another layer of security, the numerical key was changed every week, so the brutish minds of the Amatsukami would never be able to break it.

However... this was the same military command that had underestimated the enemy from the start of the war. He knew there was no "never." Charles had taken them on himself; he knew how up-to-date the Amatsukami military organization was. It wasn't possible to be cautious enough. The sun was about to melt into the sea as he thought. Night would come soon, making it difficult for him to see the surface of the ocean. He had to land.

Lowering the floats tucked into the Santa Cruz, he opened all the flaps. Throttling the engine and glancing quickly over the dashboard, he began descending, lowering his speed and straightening their direction using the check helm as he pulled the control stick toward him.

The Santa Cruz, losing speed over a smooth area of ocean, landed on its floats with hardly any impact, splashing some waves around it as it settled on the surface of the ocean. It floated on three points: the floats, and the tail.

Coming to a full stop, Charles opened the windshield. He stood up from the cockpit and stretched. The sun had fallen past the horizon, and golden light could barely be seen at the edge of the sky.

Charles sat on a wing, took the five travel cases from the body, opened them along the wind, and opened the rear windshield.

Fana was still sitting silently and emotionlessly. Her eyes turned to Charles. Intimidated by her beauty up close, Charles forced out words.

"We're taking a rest here. Are you tired?"

"No."

"That's good. So, umm, about your luggage, there's too much for flight. I want to lighten the plane as much as possible, so could you pick out which ones you need and don't need?"

Fana stared at Charles, not responding. Getting a bit irritated at the aloof attitude, Charles pressed onward.

"If the plane is heavy, it becomes more likely we'll get caught from behind and shot down. If we're shot down, it won't matter how much luggage you have, right? So we need to throw away as much as possible. If I were to say it on ground the captain wouldn't have listened, so I'm requesting this of you now. There's too much luggage. You should throw stuff away. No, you need to throw stuff away. I am willing to pick out stuff and bundle up in one case, but that would mean I, a mercenary, would be touching stuff a noble would end up wearing, and that's going to bring up a whole new set of problems. Do you understand me?"

"Yes."

"So I need the Lady to pick out which clothing and underwear is needed, and which clothing and underwear is not. Don't you think five suitcases is too much for a trip covering five days and four nights? One should be enough. No, maybe even one isn't needed. Because I haven't even brought a single case into the plane. Do you understand me?"

"Yes."

"Well, thank you. If you please?"

"Okay."

Fana slowly stood up from the rear seat. Charles held out his hand, and helped Fana to stand on the wing. He regretted using a harsh tone, but Fana didn't seem to mind. Feeling bad, Charles hopped back into the cockpit to recharge the metal hydride battery.

Fiddling with the power-source device, Charles switched the metal hydride stack from "generate" to "recharge." The water suction device on the tail-end of the Santa Cruz opened, and massive amounts of ocean water flowed into the metal hydride battery, where hydrogen was extracted, stored in the hydrogen tank, and the rest of the ocean water returned. After a full night of this, enough hydrogen to last the whole day's flight would be gathered.

He glanced back at the wing. Fana was sorting through her luggage with uncertain hands. Charles, who knew her as a kid, hardly recognized the current Fana. Was that head-strong, tomboy Fana completely gone?

Fana checked the contents of the five open wooden cases. There was countless clothing, accessories, cosmetics, bedding, underwear, sleeping gowns, and even a swimsuit.

She'd left packing to her servants, so this was her first time looking at the contents. As the pilot said, this was unnecessary. No one would see her in the sky, even if she didn't put on cosmetics.

Kneeling on the wing, she sorted what she needed into one case.

The thick scent of salt surrounded her.

The color of night was winning the battle in the sky, and there were many stars. The waves washing down the float melted into the ocean.

There was nothing obstructing her view. Just an endless ocean and sky, an infinite peace.

Then Fana felt an unfathomable fear and anxiety.

As it became darker, it became more difficult to discern between ocean and sky, and a night completely different from that of the ground approached. The smell of the air, the pressing wind, all of it was intimidating.

She was frightened by the ocean being under her. If she'd slipped off the wings, she might sink, never to rise again. The color of the ocean in front of her was such that she felt such baseless fear.

The ocean wind sounded like flutes, caressing her tied hair.

Fana felt like even that wind had dark intent.

Hiding her trembling, Fana slowly continued her work.

She could still hear the irritated words of the pilot ringing in her ears.

He's surprisingly talkative.

He seemed like the type to sit in the shadows of a tree, reading, once off a plane, so his earlier rant caught her by surprise. And because she wasn't often spoken to like that, it felt refreshing.

And that annoyed face was childish and cute. It looked like an expression she'd seen before, long in the past, but she couldn't remember.

As she was searching through her memories, they heard a distant thunder in the dark.

"...?"

There were no thunder clouds when the sun was still up. But that rumbling was continuing. It was getting closer. No, this...wasn't thunder. It was the sound of an airship's lifting device.

Fana looked from the wing to the cockpit. Charles had already stuck his head out of the windshield, and was staring in the direction of the sound.

Blue light reflected off of Charles' eyes.

It wasn't a star. He focused. A cluster of light, accompanied by the sound of traveling

thunder, came their way with swiftness. Even more, a ray of golden light was pointed toward the ocean from the cluster of light, looking for something.

It was without question a large Amatsukami airship. It was difficult determining the distance, because of the darkness, but his experience told him it was a destroyer.

The blue light was for night-time flight, and the gold light was a search light. Probably out of confidence of their air superiority, it was blasting light at full power at night, flying without fear. Clearly looking for something.

They would be caught by the searchlight if they didn't move. Charles quickly shouted to Fana, who was sorting through luggage on the wing.

"My Lady, get in the back seat quickly, we have to go."

He barely saw Fana look at him, dubiously. Charles shouted. "Forget the luggage, quickly!"

"Y-yes."

As ordered, clutching only the swimsuit she was holding at the moment, Fana hurriedly slid into the rear seat. Charles glanced quickly over the dashboard, and the plane began sliding across the surface. The luggage left on the wing would all slide into the ocean. Looking at the swimsuit she was holding, Fana regretted not taking something more useful.

As he'd done on the runway, Charles held the counter-break downward, and slid to a waterspace beyond the reach of the destroyer's searchlights. He couldn't take off, because it was night. He wasn't skilled enough to land with no visibility.

After some distance, Charles looked behind him. Judging by the sound of the lifting device and the searchlight at its underbelly, it was about 200 meters above surface, maybe 1,000 meters away from them. The thick ray of light was scouring the ocean, checking even underwater.

Charles barely breathed until the destroyer was gone. He could make out a line of fighter planes on either side of the destroyer, also searching. If Charles had stopped on the air path he usually used, they would have doubtlessly been caught. Taking advantage of his experience flying across the central ocean, his spontaneous decision to land off-course had saved them.

The creepy, blue light in the darkness finally turned away and left for the western sky, swallowed by the stars.

Phewwwwww. He exhaled as he wiped sweat from his brow. Resting against the seat, he stared upward and spoke to both himself and Fana.

"That was close, but we were able to avoid being found."

"Yes."

"That fleet may have been looking for us. It's very likely. Otherwise they wouldn't set up a line to scour the ocean surface."

"Yes," Fana absent-mindedly replied. But Charles was just organizing his thoughts aloud, and wasn't expecting any actual response.

"The enemy may know about this operation. If our coded messages have been broken, that's not surprising."

"Yes."

"It's not a situation I want to think about, but we'll have to keep that in mind. Even though I'm praying from the bottom of my heart that isn't the case."

"Yes. Umm..."

"Yes?"

"Thank you."

"What?"

"For... carefully explaining things to me..." Fana mumbled. Charles didn't know how to reply, and just stayed silent. He didn't know why the empress-to-be was thanking him. She could act more haughty.

The Knights had actually suspected the code had been broken, as he'd just surmised to Fana. Whenever they launched to raid an enemy, the enemy would be set up with a wall of Shinden, as if they knew of the attack beforehand. Each time, the pilots would demand an explanation, but command would simply reply, "the savage brains of the Amatsuvian yadda yadda".

But even if the code were broken, this operation was called Black-tailed Gull, and the letters that used those words would make no sense to anyone unrelated. However stupid command may be, they weren't going to just write down what they were doing.

Then...what was that fleet doing?

Fana spoke, as he thought.

"Umm, Mr. Pilot?"

"Yes?"

"If I may ask, is the transmission code broken?"

"It's very possible."

"Um."

"Yes?"

"Ummmm."

"What is it?"

"The imperial prince Carlo... often sends me letters, using the military radio telegraph."

"What are you two doing?"

"I'm sorry, but, umm... in the letter I received a few days ago, he wrote about how he was worried for me. Being cramped into a recon plane for five days, crossing the central ocean without any escort, how he thought it was unseemly. And he rambled for five pages about that."

A long, long silence followed inside the windshield, between the front and back seats. It was so quiet that all that was heard was the waves crashing against the floats. Fana broke it first.

"... was that bad?"

Wordlessly, Charles opened his windshield, stepped out of the cockpit, and stepped

onto the wing.

The impact of the confession was so enormous he couldn't stand anymore, and he crumbled down on the wing, groaning. If that transmission was read, operation black-tailed gull was pretty much explained to the enemy.

Mentally, Charles cursed, spit on, laughed at, and beat up the imperial prince Carlo for quite some time. Who did he think this whole operation was for? Why was he personally leading everything to failure? How stupid did he have to be? Maybe being passionate was the specialty of the Levahm, and the imperial prince Carlo was simply trying to fulfill his role, but for god's sakes, please, stop being such an idiot.

The storm of his rage ending, Charles' soul was simply left with a wind of despair. Operation Black-tailed Gull was possible only because of its secrecy. The enemy, knowing that a recon plane was trying to go through central ocean with Fana in the back seat, would lie in wait with full armament, and upon discovery would follow with all its power. Now he had to prepare for the worst scenario, for a flock of Shinden giving chase.

His hands shook. His heart raced, and he began trembling all over.

The situation had, quickly, become unprecedentedly bad.

The operation was already a difficult wish, but imperial prince Carlo's letter made it even more difficult.

The enemy knew everything about the plan, and fleets centered around carriers would be waiting at every turn, ready to greet the empress with Shinden from its bosom.

Meanwhile all he had one was rear-seat machine gun, and worse still, the gunner wouldn't be a trained pilot, but a noble Lady who'd probably never even held a weapon before.

He could turn around and return to Armelia airport. It was still possible to turn around and cancel the mission.

But that would be unforgivable. The air force and the Knights had sacrificed so much for this mission. How many of them were unable to return? If he turned around, their deaths would have been completely in vain. They went gallantly to their deaths for the empress-to-be, nothing else. If he were to go back now, the air force would simply laugh at the del Moral Aerial Knights, dubbing them cowards. And he couldn't bring

such a shameful name down upon the Knights, who'd happily become decoys for him.

And, he knew from the start this would be a difficult trip. Just because an unexpected problem popped up didn't mean he wanted to stop now. He wanted to see this proud mission to its end.

It's still okay, he told himself. The code hadn't necessarily been broken. The only thing that was sure, was that a fleet had scoured the ocean surface alone. That's all. They may have been looking for something other than the Santa Cruz.

Charles tried to regain his composure.

Pilots have to be composed at all times. Otherwise they'd panic during a fight, lose control of the plane, and die. They had to control themselves at all times, to survive, and they had to keep strengthening their self-control. Always, everywhere, no matter what.

Breathing deeply, he send fresh air into his lungs. Then he smacked his cheeks once, twice, thrice.

With a determined look, he turned to the west, for Cyon island.

All he could do was keep moving forward. There was no point in whining. He couldn't run away just because things became harder. A man needs to overcome everything.

He kept persuading himself with these thoughts, and stood up on his trembling knees.

I'll fly straight to Cyon island.

Determined, though trembling, he glanced across the dark horizon.

"Umm... are you okay?"

Fana poked her head out of the windshield and looked at Charles, worried.

Charles forced a smile, and held out his chest.

"I'm fine, no problem. I'll pull out the Lady's bed now, so please give me a moment."

He pulled out a rubber boat from the plane, tossed it into the ocean, and filled it with

an air pump fixed to the top of the tail. The bundle of rubber, floating on the ocean, slowly began to puff up.

This military-use boat, made of thick rubber, was created so that pilots could spend the night sleeping on it, and was big enough to fit three adults. It had good floating power, and you could even bring a fishing rod to do some fishing.

Once enough air had been pumped, he called to the rear seat.

"This is for the Lady's use, so feel free to do whatever you want. Oh, right, are you hungry? Shall I make an evening meal?"

The moonlight helped him see Fana climb out of the rear seat. Her voice trembled as she opened her beautiful lips.

"Thank you. And, umm, if I may ask."

"Yes?"

"..."

"What's wrong? Motion sickness?"

Fana wobbled across the top of the plane, stepped onto the wing, and looked up at Charles.

"Umm."

"Yes?"

"..."

Fana stayed silent, just looking up at Charles.

He felt like he would be sucked into the pure eyes.

The deep, quiet pair of eyes, with lighting that was comparable to the starry sky above them, was of bottomless beauty, such that he felt his soul about to be sucked away. They sucked away his strength, and he felt in danger of slipping off the wings if he wasn't being careful.

Clinging to his fragile state of mind, Charles tried to figure out what Fana was trying to say.

"If you have complaints about the path I'm taking..."

"No, I have no complaints. Mr. Pilot, please, just take a guess."

"...?"

He couldn't even guess, so many things had happened, and maybe his brain was tired.

Fana was usually emotionless, but her shadow showed traces of pain. Like she was holding something back. Like she was holding back tears — that's when Charles realized it.

"Oh, bathroom!"

He clapped his hands together. He hadn't even thought of that.

Pilots generally don't care about that at all during flight. During long flights, many of them just do their business in their flight suits. Charles wasn't that extreme, but because he couldn't stand up during flights, he would do his business in bags designed for the purpose, then toss it out the plane. But he couldn't have Fana do that.

Charles scratched the back of his head and burst out laughing.

"I'm so sorry, I hadn't even thought about that! Yes, umm, I guess the ocean is your bathroom. I'll sit in the front seat, so just call for me when you're done."

"..."

"Tomorrow is a long flight, too, so please just kick out everything inside of you. Ah, but please keep away from the water suction. If a big one were to get sucked in, gas other than just hydrogen would be spit out, ahahahah."

When he said the joke used by many pilots, a loud sound – *smack!* -along with a stinging pain on his face ran through him, and his head twisted sideways.

"How rude!"

Chased away by Fana, who he could tell was blushing even with just moonlight,

Charles quickly ran across the plane and buried himself in the cockpit.

Resting against the seat, he held a hand to his cheek and looked up.

"I just got slapped by the empress-to-be."

Beneath those words was a smile.

Fana hadn't changed that much from before, after all.

When he first saw Fana that morning, he thought she'd changed completely from their childhood. She was like a puppet doll, with no trace of liveliness.

But after a bit of interaction, he knew that inside Fana was still that head-strong, tomboy girl. The girl who scolded him for picking on a pig and shot him with an awe-inspiring look wasn't dead. And that made him happy.

Charles closed his eyes, and waited for Fana to call to him.

The silence above the ocean deepened.

But time ticked by, and he wasn't called.

He thought about poking his head out of the cockpit to check on things, but because she might still be in the middle of doing her business, he couldn't just casually look.

He was worried. He had a sinking feeling inside him. But if jumped ran out without being called and she was still doing her business...

As he was repeating that cycle of thought, he barely heard a distant voice.

"Help... me..."

In a flash, Charles leapt out of the cockpit and stood on the wing.

Fana wasn't there.

"My Lady!?"

He called out to the ocean. The reply came from beneath him.

"Mr... Pilot!"

Sticking her head out of the ocean, Fana shouted, before being sucked under again.

Fana was drowning.

Charles dove into the ocean without hesitation, and embraced Fana in the water. Her foot was stuck in the water suction hole. Sliding his arms under Fana's armpits, he kicked the plane with both legs, forcing her foot out.

Breathless, swallowing water, he threw Fana's body onto the boat, and then climbed in after her.

Fana coughed without stopping once she was on the boat.

Charles spat out ocean water as he rested his back against the boat's sides, and gasped for breath.

"What... what were you doing?"

"I'm sorry, but, umm..."

Fana just made a face. But Charles could imagine. She probably wasn't able to do her business on the wing, so she tried to do it in the water, but got her foot stuck.

One act of clumsiness after another, and this was just the first day.

Phew, he sighed, and after looking at the starry sky in relief, Charles looked at Fana again.

"Anyways, it'll get cold at night, so let's change. Were you able to gather your belongings in one case?"

"Ah..."

"...?"

"I... left everything behind."

"What?"

"Because, you flew away immediately..."

"Oh... no belongings?"

"... Just a swimsuit."

"Swimsuit?"

"... Yes."

A cold ocean breeze. Charles shivered, and looked at the drenched Fana.

Using a portable gas cylinder, he made a small fire in the cooking stove. The blue flame blazed well, and warmed the two of them on the rubber boat. To prevent discovery from above, they covered the fire with a four-legged steel plate, and placed a coffee pot over the plate.

Charles covered himself in a blanket, warming both hands with the fire. The flight suit he'd taken off was drying on the propeller, along with Fana's clothing.

Fana was on the other side of the stove, also covered in a blanket. Both of them shivered in the cold air.

"Well, a lot of problems on the first day." Charles jokingly remarked.

Fana, embarrassed, mumbled, "I'm sorry for troubling Mr. Pilot so much."

"Oh, no, don't even worry about it. My lack of preparation made the Lady have to go through extreme lengths... ahahahah." He laughed, fixing his blanket.

Fana's wet hair, skin, and her thin collarbone were bluish-white, illuminated in the darkness only by the stove fire. If you were to take off her blanket, she would be naked... or close to it, with her swimsuit. Likewise, Charles was only wearing his wood-fiber underwear.

The appearance of Fana was mesmerizing. Droplets slid down her bare, white neck, down into her hidden breastline.

He could still remember the feeling of embracing her in the water. So fragile that it felt just a bit of force would snap her, so soft, so comfortable—

Realizing the direction of his mind, he shook his head, warding away vulgar thoughts.

But no matter how hard he tried, his eyes kept wandering to Fana. Her figure was acting like gravity, sucking your soul away the moment she entered your vision. All that was left was to bask in the divinity of it all.

She was already fortunate enough to have been born into the special status of House del Moral, but on top of that she had beauty "like getting lost in the face of pure light." Just how much love did God have for her? To Charles, stuck at the bottom of society from childhood, Fana was someone from a distant, distant world.

She was not someone he should be able to converse over a fire with. He had to remember his position.

So remembering, he forced his eyes away from Fana.

"After my body warms up, I'll sleep in the cockpit. The Lady can use the boat."

"In such a small space?"

"I'm used to it. I'll sleep better there than in a makeshift bed."

"Is... that so."

"Please turn off the fire when you sleep."

"Yes, umm."

"Yes?"

"No... nevermind."

Swallowing her words, Fana returned her gaze to the fire.

For some reason, Charles' heart raced, and he could feel his blood heat up.

Feeling himself beginning to lose control, he stood up and jumped onto the tail of the plane.

"Well then, Lady, have a good night. We'll set out before dawn tomorrow, too."

"Okay. Good night, Mr. Pilot."

"Good night."

After saying it once more, Charles escaped into the cockpit, and closed the windshield.

Using the parachute as a cushion for his seat, he pulled the blanket up to his chin, and stared at the summer stars of the night sky.

Lots of things happened today. Yet despite being drained both physically and mentally, Charles couldn't sleep. If he let down his guard, the feeling of embracing Fana in the water would return, and he'd think of Fana's white body.

"I'm an idiot."

Exasperated at his thought-process despite being in the middle of such an important mission, he grew angry.

Forcing his eyes shut, and sketching out flight paths that he would take tomorrow, Charles awaited sleep.

Chapter 5

When his eyes opened, heavy, dense clouds were gathered beyond the windshield.

Sliding the windshield back, Charles poked his head out of the cockpit.

Cloud density seven or eight. The eastern sun hadn't risen above the horizon yet. He could barely hear the waves washing the floats, and the salty wind caressed his face.

The second morning.

He extended his arms into the air and stretched backward.

Then, stepping onto the plane from the cockpit, he slid his arms through the flight suit hanging from the propeller.

It hadn't fully dried yet and was uncomfortable. If he were alone he'd prefer to fly in his pants, but because of Fana he couldn't.

Fana's flight suit was also only half-dried. But she only had this and the swimsuit. Walking to the tail with her flight suit in hand, he jumped onto the boat.

Fana slept curled up like a child.

With an innocent look, hands clasped together, and barely-audible breath coming through her barely-open lips. Her blanket was only up to her breasts, and her neck and shoulders were exposed.

Charles' sight went automatically to her breasts. Hidden by her swimsuit, sure, but that didn't hide their form, and Charles learned she was hiding a lot of herself under her clothing. Or to be more precise, he'd never before met someone who hid so much of her form with clothing, and probably never would again.

On an endless ocean, alone with a girl of absolute beauty.

Charles clung desperately to reason. He held up his feeling of servitude that had been fostered since he was young, suppressed the animal nature inside him, and twisting his neck against its will, peeled his eyes away. Like ripping apart a tree with bare hands,

he finally managed to look away from Fana, and, maintaining his calm, called to her.

"Good morning, Lady."

Fana's eyes slowly opened. Charles' back was to her.

"Good... morning."

Fana slowly pushed herself up, and realized her blanket wasn't covering up to her neck. Hurriedly she pulled it up, and ended up looking like she was wearing one big robe.

"It's still only half-dry, but if possible..."

Charles turned half of his face to Fana, and held out the flight suit. Fana also stuck her arm out of the blankets, took it, and held it to her.

"Yes, I can wear it."

"Okay, then. If you could please change now, I'd like to leave before the sun rises. I'll be in the cockpit."

Awkwardly, Charles picked up the cooking stove and jumped onto a wing.

Fana only stuck her head through the flight suit, and with it covering her, took off her swimsuit. She didn't like the feeling of wet clothing touching her skin directly, but she had to tolerate it.

After confirming that Fana had gotten into the back seat, Charles jumped back out of the cockpit, walked to the tail, let the air out of the rubber boat, and tucked it back into the plane. With that done, he ran back to the front seat.

"Alright, here goes the second day. As before, please keep watch at the back."

"Okay."

With that short exchange, Charles started the engine. The propeller began spinning, the floats made some small waves, and the tail, which had been slightly underwater, rose into the twilight with a splash.

By the time the sun rose over the horizon, the Santa Cruz had already punctured the

clouds and climbed diagonally into the air.

That day the clouds were plentiful, perfect for covert operations.

Like a skipping stone, Charles jumped from cloud to cloud, calmly heading north west.

Before they'd said a word to each other, the sun had already climbed past the Santa Cruz, and began falling to the west. Charles' sight became covered by light, making his watch difficult. He put on his flight goggles to shade his eyes from the light.

Fana, in the back seat, was devoting all of her attention to keeping watch.

Until they passed the Great Fall, they would simply be heading toward more and more enemies, the head pilot had mentioned before he'd taken off. To get past the central ocean, they had to find the enemy before they were found. Over the course of the two weeks of training, Fana had heard that over and over again. Without getting bored of the monotony of the sky, Fana kept concentrating.

And then — she saw something.

Voice pipe in hand, she told Charles.

"Upper-right corner, I see a light between the clouds."

Charles turned his neck toward the designated area. "Right" and "left" used in the plane were based on the nose. He saw a stretch of clouds at 5,500 meters altitude, but he couldn't see anything.

"I don't see anything."

"I saw it past the cloud with the ragged bottom."

Fana was referring not to the stratus cloud near them, but one far behind them, about 7,000 meters altitude, a cirrostratus cloud that looked like its bottom had been punctured with a needle several times. It was at least 1,500 meters horizontally from them.

After a moment, Charles' facial muscles twitched.

As Fana had said, for just an instant, there was a light that flashed beyond the cloud.

The enemy propeller had probably reflected the sun. For her to have caught sight of something that far away with her naked eyes was amazing.

"It's an enemy plane. That's incredible."

"Are we being chased?"

"Let's pray we're not."

Charles flew into a cloud that would obstruct them from the enemy. Fana stared at the line, over 1,000 meters away.

"It's not coming, it's going away."

Hearing Fana, Charles looked behind again.

Between the clouds, Charles' trained eyes re-located the earlier light. He could see the light wasn't going in the Santa Cruz' direction. The enemy hadn't found them. Charles exhaled in relief. He picked up the voice pipe.

"That's one thing gone. It means the Lady's eyesight beat theirs. That was splendid work."

Charles spoke no lie. If Fana could do that, then breaking the 12,000 kilometer blockade might not be a pipe dream.

"It was just one plane, so it was probably a patrol plane. If we were found, it would have sent a radio to its mothership, and we would have had to take on an immeasurable number of fighter planes. That was close."

"Was that good?"

"Yes. Of course."

"I'm glad."

Fana also exhaled with relief at Charles's words.

"But this isn't the end of it. Please keep watching."

"Ok."

Gathering her focus again, Fana hung the voice pipe on the wall again.

She began staring at the sky again. Come to think of it, she hadn't retreated behind the glass wall even once today. She'd been staring at the reality in front of her with all her might.

It felt strange.

Before they'd left, she couldn't make herself care about what would happen to her. Yet here she was, staring at reality in the face, and feeling alive again. Perhaps it was because she was treading the line between life and death. No, it might be more than that.

She had fun talking to Charles over the voice pipe.

His voice coming through the metal speakers was sometimes nervous, sometimes extraordinarily polite, sometimes relieved, sometimes angry. He was throwing words directly at Fana, without hiding anything. That felt refreshing.

I want to hear his voice more.

Fana realized she'd begun thinking that way. They were so close that if she were to turn around, she could see each individual strand of his hair, but they were too distant for conversation. If Fana were to pick up the voice pipe and suddenly begin talking, Charles would probably be stupefied.

But if she were to find another light, she could call Charles.

Because of that, Fana kept her eyes peeled, watching the sky.

Afterwards, Fana found two more dots of light, and told Charles. Each time, Charles would use the clouds to avoid them, while speaking to Fana through the voice pipe.

She knew they were in a life-or-death situation.

But Fana was having fun. She felt like she could feel his heartbeat through the seat. There were some sharp turns, climbs, descents, and even some things that caused her to want to vomit as he steered through clouds, but she never felt like she wanted to run. She had felt that way so often, surrounded by House del Moral tutors.

The ocean was being swallowed by darkness again.

The sun, settling under the horizon, coloured the clouds' underbellies brass, and the direction Charles was heading in was turned into a complex mix of indigo blue, white and gold.

With the miniature sky as the background, the Santa Cruz turned to an elegant angle of elevation, and landed on its floats on the golden ocean.

Having left behind white trails, Charles made sure the plane had come to a stop, took off his flight goggles, opened the windshield, and stood on the wing.

"Thank you for your hard work, My Lady. We are still safe."

Charles happily opened the rear windshield and gave Fana a hand to help her onto the wing.

"You saved me so much today. To be honest, when we took off, I thought I would have to keep watch over the rear, but that was a complete error on my part. Most pilots haven't half your skill at keeping watch."

"You're praising me too much."

"No, not at all. Because of you, we were able to avoid at least two aerial fights. At this rate, we might be able to smoothly go through the central ocean."

She could tell Charles was flushed, even amidst the red sky. He looked truly happy. Fana felt embarrassed.

The second day's travels had finished, and Charles was in high spirits. He had wondered what would happen when he heard about the imperial prince's letter, but the enemy patrols weren't that great. The day had gone so well that he wondered if the enemy had pilots capable of following Charles, and observers capable of beating Fana.

"Let's have our evening meal. You may not like rations, so let's try fishing. Hold on."

With that, Charles buried his head into the plan's body, and took out two fishing rods. Fana looked at him suspiciously.

"Fishing?"

"Yes. If we can catch some, we can have a good dinner. If we can't, we'll just have to make do with rations."

"Like a fisherman."

"Would you like to try your hand?"

With a carefree smile, Charles held out a fishing rod to Fana.

Fana accepted the simple fishing rod. It was simply a hook protruding from a metal bait.

Both of them sat down on the rubber boat and dropped their lines.

The sunset slowly disappeared from the western sky, and the summer night descended on the ocean. The infinite night sky, the endless bottom of the ocean, and the bottomless silence greeted them. Using the plate-covered cooking stove as a light, they quietly held their fishing rods.

Even Fana understood that the waterspace they were on was controlled by the Amatsukami air fleet. Yet, she found it strange she was there, fishing in enemy waters.

And she didn't feel any fear, but a mysterious sense of peace.

"Nothing's biting."

When the sky had become filled with stars, Charles disappointingly said, after they'd both sat on the boat for some time.

"Nope."

"Are you hungry?"

"No, I'm fine. I don't have much of an appetite."

All day, Fana had only nibbled a bit on bread. Ever since they'd left Rio de Este, her stomach had been constantly jostled by the plane and boat, so it wasn't accepting food.

"How about you, Mr. Pilot?"

"Sorry, I'm actually starving."

"Oh my. Well I guess we should keep trying to fish. If Mr. Pilot were to starve to death here, I'd be lonely by myself."

As she joked, Fana shook her fishing rod left and right. Then—

"Oh. It just, kind of, twitched."

"What?"

"Oh dear, it's, it's moving."

"M..My Lady, you caught one, carefully, carefully."

"I'm-I'm scared, it's, it's really being pulled."

As she said, the fishing rod was being pulled heavily. Fana was using all of her strength to hang onto the fishing rod, but the catch was stronger. Fana's body kept sliding forward, and as much as the boat may have been built for military use, that didn't mean it had flawless footing.

"H-help."

He wanted to help, but Charles didn't know how, but when she called for help, he threw everything to the wind.

"Please excuse me, my Lady."

Apologizing, he quickly went behind Fana, and put his arms around her to grip the fishing rod. It looked like he was embracing her. He continued apologizing.

"Umm, this isn't meant to be vulgar. I just think this is the only way to keep the boat's balance."

"N-no, it-it's fine."

"Lady, this is definitely a big catch. Pull on three, okay?"

"O-Okay."

Fana gripped the fishing rod tighter with a determined look. The boat kept shaking, and the footing was becoming dangerous. And Charles's voice, right to her ear was

ticklish. She could feel his chest on her back. And the arms wrapped around her from behind. Naturally, she blushed.

"My Lady, here we go."

"Ah, o-okay!!"

"One, two, *three*!"

Unaware that Fana was thinking of other things, Charles suddenly pulled. Snapping out of it, Fana, though late, also pulled.

With a big splash, a large fish -at least five kilograms in size -flew out, danced into the air while waving its fins and, somehow, free-fell diagonally right into Fana's face.

POW, Fana heard in the distance.

"M-my Lady!?"

Fana lost her balance, and Charles, still supporting her, tried to solidify his footing for her, but the boat ended up bending sideways, and both of them ended up in an irreversible angle toward the ocean.

"Err," Was all Charles managed, before he fell head-first into the ocean, still holding Fana.

As with the night before, there was a big splash next to the Santa Cruz.

Blowing bubbles from his nose, once again, Charles embraced Fana underwater, and held onto the edge of the rubber boat.

"Again, I apologize..."

"No, I'm the one that messed up first."

Sitting on either side of the cooking stove, the two of them, for the second night in a row, covered their bare skin with a blanket to dry off.

Under the yellow crescent moon, Charles and Fana's flight suits hung on the Santa Cruz' propeller.

Trying to cheer her up, Charles smiled.

"But see, we were able to catch a fish. This big! And it's the Lady's catch."

"Yes... although I caught it with my face."

"Ah... hahaha..."

Seeing Charles' awkward laugh, Fana laughed at him.

And the two of them huddled up with their blankets. Their hearts were beating faster than the night before. Charles raised his head again, sounding cheerful when he spoke.

"Alright, lets cut it up. Have you eaten sashimi?"

"Osashimi... Amatsukami cooking? I have not."

"It's the best way to eat fresh fish. Leave it to me."

Still covered in a blanket, Charles pulled out a kitchen knife and a wooden board from the plane. Fana started thinking the plane's enclosure was a magic box.

"I'm used to long-distance flights, so I know what to bring," Charles proudly stated as he cut up the fish. In a flash, the big fish turned into three big slices, which was further cut down into tiny slivers and lined on a paper plate.

"And eaten with shouyu."

Fana, without any hesitation, used the fork handed to her and brought a slice, thinly covered in shouyu, to her mouth. After politely chewing, her silver-white eyes opened wide.

"Delicious."

Charles smiled, picking up a sliver with chopsticks.

"Ah, yes it is."

Looking proud, Charles started munching away.

"Keep eating, Lady, without feeding yourself, you won't be able to live."

Fana didn't have much of an appetite before, but pressed on by Charles, found her fork automatically moving. The skipjack tuna was meaty, juicy, and addicting.

While eating, Charles explained the rest of their trip.

"Tomorrow we'll pass through the Great Fall. It's the enemy's most closely guarded airspace. It'll be the most difficult part of the journey, so we'll have to be at our best."

"Okay."

"After the Great Fall, I'll land near the Sierre Cadis archipelago to tune the plane. When you fly three days without maintenance, the metal hydride battery starts running a risk of breaking down.

"We'll spend our third night at the archipelago, and the fourth day will be spent flying to Cyon island. La Pista air base is stationed on Cyon island, and they're in daily aerial combat with the Awashima-based Amatsukami air force. But we're not joining the fray.

"If we get that far, our journey is mostly done. Should the enemy raids be too severe, we'll ignore the La Pista air base and go straight to Cyon Island. There, I'll call the Levahm mainland, after which an airship will be sent to pick you up. They should arrive on the fifth day."

"Yes, umm."

"Yes?"

"What is Mr. Pilot going to do after the fifth day?"

"Ah, we'll be parting on Cyon island. Once my Lady has been transferred to the airship, I'll head to the La Pista airbase to join the combat."

"I... see."

Charles, untroubled, kept eating the delicious sashimi.

"For the people of the mainland, I'm better off not existing. Once the journey is over, the Lady will not return having been saved by a mercenary, but will miraculously return, rescued by the Eighth Special Mission Fleet."

"I heard the Eighth Special Mission Fleet was annihilated..."

"You can always make stuff up. The airship that'll pick up Lady will be called the lone surviving ship of the Fleet, and the plan is to welcome you back into the imperial capital Esmeralda with flying colors. The imperial family loves showmanship, after all."

"But... that's hiding the truth."

"The imperial court is worried about the stagnating morale of the populace of late, so that's a trivial cost for getting a massive pro-war boost."

"And Mr. Pilot is fine with that?"

"Because I'm a mercenary. In turn, I'll given quite a sum to remain silent. So I've got no complaints."

"Is that how it is."

"That's how it is."

Charles hardly twitched as he kept eating. But Fana wasn't satisfied.

"I think that's wrong. Mr. Pilot is the one that worked hard, but people that did nothing get all the glory."

"But that's only if everything goes well. We should just focus on making sure we make it. If there's no glory to be had, there's nothing to be angry about."

"That's true, but..."

Charles felt amused by Fana's attitude. The memory of young Fana stirred in his mind again. A long time ago, Fana also had a fierce sense of justice. The Fana sitting in front of him was like a grown version of that Fana.

"You're still not satisfied?"

"No."

"Even if no one else knows about me, if Lady remembers me, that's enough for me," Charles said, carelessly.

But Fana, looking serious, said, "Okay. Then I'll remember pilot Charles, forever."

"I don't deserve such an honor."

"I'm not joking."

Growing a bit irritated at Charles because he wasn't taking her seriously, Fana continued eating.

It was a clear night.

Thousands of glittering stars were in the sky. They were so closely packed together that it felt like if she were to reach up, she could scoop out a handful, like the glimmering water of a stream.

Finished eating, Charles fixed the blanket over himself, rested his back against the edge of the boat, and stared up.

"Amazing stars," He whispered.

Fana also untangled her feet under the blanket, and looked up at the same view. "Truly."

It was a night sky more beautiful than anything Fana had seen before.

"But it's better for flying if there're clouds," Charles added with a yawn.

Charles was much more tired than he thought. He'd spent two days flying six thousand kilometers, and had slept in the cramped cockpit at night, so it wasn't surprising.

Just taking one deep breath and closing his eyes for a moment was enough to make Charles fall into a calm sleep.

"Mr. Pilot...?" Fana called. But there was no reply.

She was stupefied by how quickly Charles had fallen asleep.

But Fana quickly started giggling. She knew Charles was tired. She thought she'd give him the boat tonight, and she'd sleep in the cockpit. He was sitting in the cockpit all day, so he should at least sleep with his legs free. She wanted to say that last night, but she didn't have the courage to, so she swallowed her words.

She dumped the remainder of the fish into the ocean, washed the dishes and cooking utensils with ocean water, then placed everything back into the body of the plane.

When she was done cleaning and had returned to the boat, Charles was in a deep sleep.

The sleeper's soft breath melted into the silence of the ocean.

Sitting back down, she hugged her knees under the blanket, and placed her chin on her knees.

"Mr. Piiiiiiloooooooot." She tried calling to him, mischievously.

No reaction.

He no longer had that tense aura around him; Charles was now sleeping like a puppy exhausted after play.

"Chaaaaaaarleeeeeees." She tried calling his name.

Still no reaction. Fana smiled and tilted her head, resting her cheek against her knee, gazing at his sleeping face.

"Have we... met, before?" She asked the question that had been bothering her since the journey had begun. She felt like she'd seen the straight, but somewhat mournful look of Charles in the past.

"Why do you fly?"

No answer.

"Do you like war?"

Only his breath answered her. But, if he were awake, this person would probably say "no". He didn't seem like the type of person who would lead the charge in killing people.

"I hate it, too. I really, really hate it."

Conversing by herself, she made sure Charles was still fast asleep before sitting down next to him. Leaning against the edge of the boat, she looked up.

The sky, the ocean, the stars, everything had frozen in place. The cold wind blew indifferently.

Soundless time passed. The black, limitless ocean drew forth a primal fear from deep inside Fana. The clear starry heaven, too, was so big that it was intimidating.

Fana looked at Charles' profile, at her side.

He wasn't feeling any fear. He was just peacefully sleeping, oblivious. She puffed her cheeks, then blew out. Something warm was settling inside of her. Something deep inside her was pleased, sitting next to Charles.

Gradually, Fana's eyelids also grew heavy. The rocking of the boat was so steady, so comfortable, that it invited sleep. Fana, too, was tired from the adventure.

She sank into a deep sleep.

Thousands of stars watched over the sleeping pilot and empress-to-be, both of whom looked as if they would sleep on each other's shoulders. The ocean rocked their cradle ever so slightly.

Pushed by the waves until the low horizon became purplish-blue, the two of them snuggled against each other, like Java birds.

Chapter 6

Beyond the plate stationed in front of the windshield, the white cumulonimbus clouds stood in stark contrast to the blue sky. It was like a picture you'd see on a picture card, but Charles, gripping the control stick, looked displeased.

He looked at the altitude meter. They were currently at 4,500. The height of the cumulonimbus cloud obstructing them was at least 10,000 meters. Fortunately there was only one, so he decided to go around it.

For the first time since they'd taken off that morning, Charles picked up the voice pipe.

He hadn't spoken to Fana at all since that shocking wake-up. He felt he needed to speak to her, even if he had to force himself. After closing his eyes and calming himself, he opened his mouth, ordering himself to speak normally.

"L-Lady."

But his words stuttered out against his will. Biting his lips, he tried to force himself to speak naturally, when Fana's voice came back to him from the voice pipe.

"W-what is it?"

Fana's words were also shaken. It wasn't surprising that she felt the same. Charles tried to act like nothing happened.

"Um, there's a cumulonimbus cloud in our way, so I'm going to have to change our route a bit."

"Oh, is that so?"

"Yes. It looks like a storm cloud, so I don't want to plunge into it."

"Oh. How scary."

Fana was speaking in a deliberately awkward manner, but he knew she was trying her best at sounding normal.

"Once we're past the cloud, I expect to see enemy planes. As before, I'm entrusting the rear to the Lady."

"Ok."

The awkward conversation ended.

Charles placed the voice pipe back to the side and exhaled. The burden that he'd felt on his shoulders since that morning lightened a bit because of the conversation — maybe. He didn't really need to tell Fana what he just told her, but for the purposes of the rest of the journey he wanted a return to normalcy.

Every time he let down his guard, the morning's sight would return to his mind.

Whenever that happened, he'd shake his head and try to focus on flight, but every time he'd think only of Fana's exposed body. They were in the middle of an important mission, and he was in enemy airspace. He had to keep a lookout for enemy planes. But all his mind could focus on was a naked girl, and he couldn't help but think he was a damned fool for it.

That morning, the eastern sky was turning a purplish-blue.

Charles was almost awake, in a light sleep.

Thick mist rose from the ocean before sunrise, and it was the coldest period of the day. Shivering, he shifted the blanket back to his chin. Feeling a soft warmth on his shoulder, he automatically leaned toward it.

It smelled pure and good. He was becoming more conscious, but he didn't want to get out of his blanket. Charles buried his face in the warmth. And then the scent went toward the sensors in his brain, and his brain reacted in a very natural way to that scent, ordering his groin area to "stand up!" As the subordinate in his groin area followed the order to Charles slowly opened his sleepy eyes.

And he realized the warm, soft thing, was the breast of Fana, who was sleeping against his left arm.

After blinking once, he ripped himself away from Fana and looked at what was in front of him again. Fana, wearing a white swimsuit, just continued sleeping. Fana's blanket had fallen to her side, and both of them had ended up sharing a blanket.

And Charles was only wearing his wood-fiber underwear.

He had brushed skin with the imperial prince Carlo's fiancée, and shared a blanket with her.

"*What*-" He blurted.

And both of Fana's eyes, in response, opened.

The two of them, half-naked, stared at each other.

Gradually, Fana's eyes widened, and she looked down at his groin.

Charles' subordinate, still following his brain's orders from earlier, roared into Fana's pure, undirtied sight.

Charles definitely heard Fana's throat make a sound.

And then the two silver-white eyes returned to Charles' face.

And in front of him, Fana's mouth opened wide.

Maybe I should wear earplugs, Charles thought absent-mindedly.

"*KYAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA!!!*"

Charles silently braved the close-ranged scream. Even as the scream ended, his subordinate stood firm.

After she calmed down, he explained what had happened, how it was a natural male condition, how he couldn't really stop it, and firmly pressing that it had nothing to do with what he wanted to do. Fana in turn apologized for being careless the night before, and amidst the awkward silence that followed, the two changed into their flight suits. Without another word, they took off for the third day's journey.

After passing by the cumulonimbus cloud, they found themselves in front of a stratocumulus cloud. It was extremely wide, covering most of the visible area with cloud and obscuring their vision of the ocean. Plus, there were no clouds above it, so it was extremely likely that they would be caught if they flew higher.

After a bit of thought, Charles decided to go under the thick cloud. The windshield became covered in white, and after a moment, the dark ocean surface appeared in front of them.

At an altitude of about 1,000, he corrected the plane's direction, and headed northwest. After a few hours, they'd be able to see the Great Fall, and they'd be able to confirm their location then.

It was raining under the cloud. It made the windshield wet, but because of the velocity of the plane, droplets simply flowed to the back. Visibility was low. Charles continued scanning the front without letting up.

They were entering dangerous skies.

To their north was Awashima and to their south was Iyojima, and both islands had enormous Amatsukami aerial fort bases. It would take no time for planes to take flight to aid the blockade, and if they were discovered they'd be chased by countless Shinden from both bases. To top it off, patrol fleets looking for Fana would also be alerted, leading to the danger of being caught in a web.

So the first priority was to not be caught.

They had to forget the morning's happenings and concentrate on the task at hand.

There were cracks in the stratocumulus cloud above them. Every so often, you could see above the cloud through those cracks, but so far it'd just been the normal blue sky.

The further along they went, the mistier it became.

Visibility front and back became even more limited. He didn't want to bring the plane lower, because he couldn't see the ocean surface, so he remained right under the cloud.

For pilots, skill, experience, and "instinct" were all necessary for survival.

Seldom, a pilot is born with an inexplicable primitive feel, the ability to sense enemies hidden and undetected. The tension of enemy pilots straining to remain hidden, and the murderous intent they radiated; being able to sniff them out, act first, and strike faster was the hallmark ability of the age-old aces of the sky.

He could feel the murderous intent.

Charles' skin prickled with the abnormal feeling.

The hand gripping the control stick was covered with sweat. He looked around him, but saw nothing. He grabbed the voice pipe.

"My Lady, could you look around again? Something's close."

"Yes… umm."

"Yes?"

"I don't know if this is worth reporting or not..."

"Report anything and everything; I'll decide its worth."

"Umm, the cracks in the clouds were black."

"What?"

"I could see the blue sky through the cloud, but the crack we'd just gone past was black."

Charles' face stopped sweating, replaced by a shudder that ran down his spine.

"My Lady, that's the enemy."

"What?"

"The enemy airship is flying over the cloud; that's why the crack was black!!"

Slamming the voice pipe down, Charles looked at the cloud behind him.

He saw the cloud being sliced downward, like a spear had been thrown from heaven.

From that gash, rays of sunlight streamed toward the ocean.

It wasn't just from behind.

Surrounding the Santa Cruz, in a circle with a radius of roughly 4km, the cloud was broken here and there, golden rays pouring into the ocean.

It was like a divine drawing, but it wasn't an order of angels descending with the

sunlight. They were more vicious, more human.

"Crap...!"

Charles finally realized what was going on. He shouted to Fana, without using the voice pipe.

"An enemy ship is descending! It's cutting through the cloud-

My Lady, keep low! Don't let them see your face!"

They'd been discovered a long time ago. They'd probably been caught by the enemy carrier's radar.

This airspace was right in the middle of the enemy formation!

The coded message had obviously been broken. The enemy was lying in wait for the Santa Cruz. All around him, airships bearing the emblem of the Amatsukami descended, ripping through the cloud. The giant, potato-bug-shaped planes reflected the sunlight, bouncing brass-colored light off of their light-gray bodies.

The intimidation stemming from their full-steel bodies, the clump of heavy metal flying in the air, they looked like the stuff of gods. They were Amatsukami's latest mobility cruisers, the San'un.

Eight in all surrounded the Santa Cruz, flying at almost the same speed.

Charles narrowed his eyes. Each of the cruisers opened three, malevolent holes in their underbellies.

His chestnut-colored hair stood on end.

"Kuurai!"

Simultaneously, from all eight ships, a total of 24 kuurai missiles were fired.

The droplet-shaped percussion missiles split through the rain, each with a propeller powered by a metal-hydride battery, heading for the Santa Cruz.

At the head of each kuurai was a sensor that detected heat emanating from metal hydride batteries. The sensor allowed the missiles to give chase until contact, or until they ran out of power.

There was only one way to escape them.

Charles pushed the control stick as far as it could go, and nose-dived toward the ocean.

He couldn't see because of the mist, but this wasn't the time to be complaining.

Feeling the speed of the descent in his stomach, he kept his eyes on the altitude and speed gauges, trying to guess when they'd barely avoid the ocean.

The windshield shrieked at the sudden drop. The plane creaked and groaned.

"The missiles are chasing us!" He heard Fana's shout from behind.

"Keep your head low! I don't need you to watch anymore!" He yelled back, focusing all of his attention on the sight in front of him.

Through the rain, he was able to catch the silvery ocean. And he quickly glanced behind. There were countless missiles giving chase.

The moment he confirmed everything, he pulled the control stick with his whole body.

The propeller groaned as the Santa Cruz's nose was raised, and as if kicking the ocean to stay upright, the blue plane swiftly began sliding across the surface.

On the other side of the windshield, the sound of thunder hummed. Not just once. Twice, thrice, four times, and more, the dull sound of underwater explosions shook the sky.

In all, 18 kuurai sped into the ocean, lifting pillars of water, unable to copy his movements.

But the remaining six continued their pursuit of the Santa Cruz.

He clicked his tongue. Kuurai were faster than his plane. He'd be caught if he tried doing the same thing.

Then … he had only one more trick.

Glancing at a ship flying about 500 in altitude over the ocean, Charles turned his plane toward it.

He hit the grip on the throttle, speeding up the Santa Cruz. Power would be drained faster, but he needed to use it to survive now. He needed enough power and velocity to get on the same plane as that ship.

When he was finally able to lift the nose, he saw the many fortifications on the curved body of the ship, and the countless anti-air, anti-ship cannons housed by them. All pointed in his direction.

The next moment, fireworks blossomed around the rising Santa Cruz.

"*Kyaa*!" Fana screamed at the endless explosions.

And through the smoke, the six kuurai were still chasing the Santa Cruz in one line.

In front, the ship grew larger and larger.

The amount of gunfire also grew more severe. The windshield was almost completely obscured by gunpowder smoke. Charles delicately continued shifting the plane's location, to throw off their aim.

The enemy ship knew exactly what Charles was trying to do. That's why it was shooting back with everything it had. Two Kuurai behind him exploded. Because they were percussion, they were weak to explosive bullets. The enemy ship was desperately trying to shoot down the missiles following Charles, but¬

"Sorry." With a short apology, Charles edged past the ship and then raised the nose. The remaining four missiles were unable to follow, instead plunging into the airship's curved body.

A heavy explosion shook the air.

A whole region of ink-colored airspace became engulfed in the color of flames, and the screams of steel penetrated the sky.

The airship, splitting down the middle, began spitting out people, falling toward the cold ocean.

Fana's silver-white eyes opened wide.

This was not an opera tragedy.

In this world, that was not beyond the glass panel, tens, hundreds of people were being thrown into the air, flames covering their backs. She could see pain and resignation on their faces. Several hundred lives that were held by the ship were being exterminated with no difficulty. It was an unbelievably quick and smooth end to their lives. Each of these lives surely had families, friends, lovers, and thoughts, but in one moment, they were returned to nothing. It was Fana's first time seeing the horror of war.

But that hellish sight quickly disappeared into whiteness.

The Santa Cruz quickly shot into the cloud.

The droplets slid quickly past their sight. Wind howled across the windshield. Sunlight suddenly poured into the seats, and an endless blue dominated the world above the cloud.

And … the mobile fleet was situated far above the Santa Cruz, at about 5,000 meters altitude.

The Santa Cruz, having sliced through the cloud, looked like it was flying straight at the carrier's underbelly.

Charles narrowed his eyes and confirmed the fleet's composition.

In the middle, judging by its size, was an Amatsukami carrier. At the top was a steel runway, fielding 60-70 float-less warship fighters, missile ships, and bombers.

The Amatsukami were said to field seven carriers in total. At least one of those tigers had been scouring the skies for Fana, so he could feel the Amatsukami's determination in preventing this mission from succeeding.

Alongside this carrier were two heavy cruisers and two destroyers. Having seen the Santa Cruz, these were already in descent, their lower guns readied.

Biting his lips, Charles flew along the top of the cloud. Hitting the throttle knob once more, he raised his speed. The cloud around the Santa Cruz was carved away, creating pillars of mist like it was an ocean.

The heavy cruisers were firing. Charles controlled the engine with little movements, sliding and crawling to try to throw off their gunners' predictions, escaping along the top of the cloud.

The sky was filled with the roars of cannonfire. Explosive shells crackled around them, peppering holes in the Santa Cruz' body. Fana was so scared she didn't make a sound. The other side of the windshield was a hellish world of fire and smoke. If you were to reach out, you would shake hands with death.

"I'll get us away. Please trust me."

Amidst the sound of cannonfire, Fana was able to hear Charles' voice through the voice pipe, astonishingly clearly. It was quiet, but determined. Fana couldn't reply; she only nodded.

Charles looked behind to him, diagonally to the right.

At about 2,000 meters in distance and 2,000 meters altitude, the enemy carrier silently looked down at the Santa Cruz, not firing.

No … it wasn't just sitting and watching.

Like poppy seeds, countless shadows flew off of the runway on top.

The shadows formed in sets of seven.

"Here it comes."

What Charles feared the most in this mission had come.

His body began trembling. His confidence in surviving felt like it was being carved away by those shadows.

"There's no need to fight. I just have to run," He told himself, as he turned the engine up to maximum power.

"Fourteen ships are chasing us!"

Fana's voice trembled over the voice pipe. The enemy had two formations of seven. He glanced at the gauges, then at the airspace around him.

Far ahead to the north was a clump of cumulonimbus clouds, like a folding screen.

The crown of the clouds was around 10,000 meter altitude. A pure white mountain range in the summer sky. The silhouettes were sharp and white against the blue backdrop.

I'll run there, Charles decided as he sped the engine up more.

"My Lady, I don't need you to keep watch anymore. Keep your head low, tighten your seatbelt, and hang onto the seat."

"O-ok."

"This'll get rough. Don't talk, because you'll bite your tongue. There'll be a lot of sudden inclines and declines, so put on earplugs too."

Charles sped up even more, after getting an acknowledgment from Fana.

The needle on the speed gauge passed 600 kmph. Because they were close to the upper limit of the plane's speed, it was shaking violently and uncontrollably.

However, along with the malicious sound of propellers, a shadow fell over the control stick.

Cross-shaped shadows appeared on the cloud beneath them.

Five, six, seven – no matter how hard he tried, the shadows pursued Charles without any difficulty, and simply increased in number.

He looked behind.

Fourteen ships dominated the Santa Cruz's rear space, calmly and lackadaisically, as if mocking his attempts at escape.

"Shinden." Charles mumbled the name of the king of the sky.

Fourteen versus one.

Numbers aside, they were individually superior.

Plus, he only had one rear gun, and even that one weapon couldn't be handled by Fana.

Despair encompassed Charles' heart.

But he'd predicted this, at the start. Charles realized what he was thinking, and chased his cowardice away.

Re-gripping the control stick and breathing deeply, he told himself to calm down. If he panicked, that would be death.

The only weapon he had for getting out of this sort of situation was his piloting skills. And he knew that from the start.

Even if his plane was inferior, he was confident he was better. That he could get away.

He mumbled to himself, not audibly, and then hunkered down.

His instincts whispered to him. If he just flew like this, he'd be killed. And the next moment, Charles kicked the right foot bar.

The plane that was flying at high speeds suddenly began skidding sideways. The 20mm explosive bullets shot from the Shinden's wings stabbed through the cloud, chasing the Santa Cruz, creating a spray of mist.

He couldn't rest just because he'd evaded the first shots. The planes lined by the sides of the first plane would begin dancing, firing second and third shots at the prey that had stopped sliding sideways. Charles knew that. So when the plane stopped sliding, he kicked the left footbar, and began snaking through the cloud.

He'd managed to survive the triangular formation of Shinden. But next was the rhombus-shaped quad-formation. This group was trained for suppressive fire, as

they'd step in one after another, beginning with the leader, to shower him with an endless stream of bullets.

The Santa Cruz couldn't fly straight for even one moment. Wagging its tail and sliding left and right, it evaded shots like a sea-snake swimming through the air.

Even if the enemy were faster, it wasn't much use – in a dogfight, gunshots wouldn't land unless the planes were linearly aligned. Charles was shifting his plane every time the planes aligned. To the enemy, it was as if Charles had an eye on the back of his head.

Charles was focused completely on everything behind him.

The instincts and experience he'd accumulated guided him on the timing of the enemy's firing.

Of course, if he messed up even once, the Santa Cruz would be engulfed in flames, and would become the empress-to-be's coffin. Failure was unacceptable.

Recognizing the skill of Charles, the three-plane formation lined up, and began firing while nudging their plane left and right. Instead of focusing their fire at Charles, they would simply fire straight ahead, to scatter bullets around him.

The unnerving sound of 7.7mm bullets slamming into the Santa Cruz echoed through the cockpit. Fana had her head lowered, trembling in an overwhelming fear.

Charles looked behind him, at the punctures around the Santa Cruz. Then he glanced at the dashboard, making sure the metal hydride tank hadn't been hit.

The enemy knew what he was up to. He could no longer fight on the carpet of the cloud. Determined, Charles looked at the mountain range of cumulonimbus clouds to the north, pushed down on the footbars a bit, and pushed the control stick all the way.

The Santa Cruz leaned over and plummeted into the stratocumulus cloud.

It was a thick cloud, and he didn't know if the cloud reached all the way to the surface. Relying completely on his altitude meter, he kept the stick pushed all the way, and popped out of the other side of the cloud at about 500 meters altitude.

Pulling the stick back, he began flying northward at 200 meters altitude, flying parallel to the ocean surface.

Below him, he could see the dark ocean being pelted by rain. Looking behind, he could see the seven destroyers heading straight toward him, but they didn't open fire. They didn't want to hit their own, and they probably expected the Shinden to mop things up, anyways.

Belatedly, four Shinden broke through the cloud, and after some slight adjustments, pointed their guns at the Santa Cruz.

Only the lead plane actually crept closer. The military forbids close flight in the fog, because of the dangers of collisions. The other planes from the formation were probably above the cloud; he couldn't see them anywhere.

Charles looked forward. The cumulonimbus cloud was hard to see because of the rain. He nudged his plane in the direction he'd been going in before he'd plunged through the cloud.

Bullets streaked red lines into the sky in front of him. The four Shinden in pursuit began firing.

But Charles had gauged the enemy pilots' skill to this point.

They weren't very good.

He could see a bit of hope. Even though his plane was inferior, he was far more skilled. It was possible to escape.

The only thing the Santa Cruz had that the Shinden did not was the ability to refuel on the surface.

The single-seat interceptors, Shinden, tied the pilot's life to the plane's power supply. If they pursued an enemy plane too far and wandered out of the carrier's radio range, there was the possibility of dying, unable to return to safety. The Shinden always had to keep the carrier within sight.

Charles, piloting the Santa Cruz, was thus in a calmer state of mind on this single point. Even if the fight lasted a long time, he'd just have to touch down and refuel.

So he aimed for just one thing: to evade gunfire and crawl as far away from the carrier as possible, out of the carrier’s radio range, so that the Shinden pilots would fear running out of power.

If the enemy became worried about their power supply, folded their wings, and turned their backs on Charles, it'd be his win. Actually, that was the only way to win.

Charles glared behind him.

The four planes relentlessly kept chase. All four planes were piloted by formation leaders, so they seemed to be bristling with each other for airspace, and weren't really in formation.

The enemy pilots recognized Charles' skill, too. The gunshots weren't really aimed at him, but instead acted as a sort of warning, suppressive volley. They were either waiting for him to mess up, or waiting for someone to attack him.

Charles descended to an even lower altitude.

400, 200, 100. The needle on the altitude meter kept dipping. Gradually going lower, he tried to distinguish the ocean surface through the rain.

At about ten meters, he stopped descending. He looked behind: the four enemy planes were pursuing from about 100 meters altitude.

From now on it would just be a fight of skill. If the enemy tried attacking, they might plunge into the ocean, so they couldn't do it that easily. To take down the Santa Cruz like this, the enemy would have to also fly parallel to the ocean surface, but this obviously came with the risk of ramming the propeller into the ocean, so this would require the enemy pilots to be as skilled as him.

He could see the enemy pilots were hesitating.

He felt himself calming down again. Slowly rocking his plane and shifting the direction of his plane, Charles pulled the enemy planes with him.

He was headed toward the stratucumulus cloud over the squall line. If he could reach it, things would swing in his favor.

Just as he was beginning to see the light of hope, Fana shouted into her voice pipe.

"Five planes coming from above, to the left!"

He immediately looked up and left. As Fana said, five new Shinden were swooping toward them in a T formation, from the side.

He didn't notice until he was told. Charles had clearly let down his guard. The four planes behind him had opted not to engage in a dogfight because this formation was coming.

They were going to be hit.

"Lady, keep your head down!"

Along with Charles' shout, 20mm bullets fired from the five planes cutting in from the side created fireworks.

A wall of bullets slammed into the front half of the Santa Cruz.

Along with that, the four planes laid down blanket fire from behind.

There was no escape for Charles.

All he could do was plunge into the bullets and watch as his plane was crushed by bullets. That was when Charles subconsciously began moving his hands.

The instant he was about to plunge into the bullets from the side, Charles instinctively pressed down on the control stick, nudging his plane down.

It wasn't something you could think and do. All the experience and instincts he'd nurtured made possible the evasive maneuver that lasted a tenth of a second.

The five Shinden flew barely over the windshield, at a distance where he could have reached out and touched them. The Santa Cruz barely edged under them, at an altitude of maybe 5 meters. The ocean was so close, if they were able to stretch out their legs, they'd feel it on their feet.

And before they crashed into the ocean, he lifted the nose.

A moment of calm.

But the bullets from the planes behind were incoming.

He was going to kick the footbar, to avoid the bullets in the air. Or was.

Suddenly, along with a heavy reverbration, the glass windshield shattered.

At the same time, Charles felt like he was hit in the head with a metal bat.

His head was knocked sideways. Blood slid down from his temple, and the windshield was stained red.

"Charles!"

He could hear Fana's scream in the distance.

He didn't know what happened. The sound of the propeller slowly disappeared, overwhelmed by the sound of wind.

"Charles! Get a grip on yourself! Charles!!"

His vision blurred, distorted, and warped. He could hear Fana's voice. Her voice anchored his fading consciousness.

He could smell the stench of his own blood. He couldn't feel any pain. But if he let up for even a moment, he would lose consciousness. And he could feel the danger of that crawling up and down his spine.

He forced his eyes open. Blood seeped into an eye, and he instinctively wiped it away. Droplets of water slammed into the cockpit.

He could see the backs of the five Shinden rising to the right of the Santa Cruz.

There weren't just five from the left. There were also five from the right. Charles didn't realize that at all, and ended up taking the other half.

This is it, I guess, he thought, feeling the wind and rain hitting his face.

"Come on!" Fana turned around and shouted to him, without using her voice pipe.

Bullets had ploughed across the plane, and one had grazed Charles. Even being grazed by one was like being bludgeoned. Half of Charles' hair was becoming encrusted with blood. Rain and wind hammered mercilessly into the cockpit through the broken windshield. The temperature of the seating instantly dropped, and the cold set in.

In front of Fana, the four Shinden from behind chased them persistently. They were like hyenas hunting down its wounded prey.

Fana bit her cherry-blossom lips. She was embarassed that all she could do was scream with her head lowered.

A 7.7mm machine gun sat in front of her, drenched by rain, dangling and spinning in every which way.

She wasn't trained with the usage of it, before they'd left. House del Moral had not wanted the empress-to-be to need to pick up a weapon of murder.

But … wasn't it necessary, now?

Unlike before, the Santa Cruz was just flying straight. It was like an animal dragging its leg, in an effort to escape. Even Fana knew they were ripe for the pickings.

Fana slowly reached out to the machine gun, glistening black.

She could feel the coldness of steel. Without question it was a weapon of murder. Quaking, she willed her trembling legs to calm, and awkwardly rotated the gun toward the enemy planes.

She glanced through the sights; the planes were so close they didn't even fit inside the sight.

"God, please forgive me."

She whispered, and she pulled the trigger.

But nothing happened.

She'd messed up somewhere, but she didn't know where. She wanted to cry, humiliated at her uselessness.

The enemy planes were so close she could even see the faces of pilots.

The enemy pilots were smirking. They were toying with her life, knowing they had it in their grasp. That was obvious from their expression. She was going to die to people making that sort of face. In the end, she could do nothing to control her own destiny. All her life, she'd lived like a doll, observing the world from the other side of a glass panel.

Filled with regret, Fana could do nothing but wait for the end.

She'd never cared about her life before. But, now that she was about to have everything come to an end, she realized how irreplaceable it was. Maybe she should have been more assertive in life.

She should have conversed with Charles more last night. She should have talked about herself, asked about Charles, so they could learn about each other, and become friends. If she'd done so, maybe, even if everything would turn out the same way, she'd have been more accepting of death.

As she was mired in a loop of endless regrets, she felt air being sucked out from her lungs, and her body felt lighter.

The plane was ascending. And it was ascending faster than ever.

The smirking faces, once so close she could see the facial muscles, became distant.

The rain and wind pouring into the seats became harsher.

Fana turned around.

Charles, covered in blood, had wrapped his legs around the control stick, controlling the plane with all his might.

"Charles!" She screamed.

"It's not over yet." Charles spoke behind him, and let go of the overboost with his right hand. Their reserve power drained away. In exchange for extreme power consumption, the overboost gave them a momentary boost in speed. He couldn't use it often, but they'd at least gotten through that hurdle.

Charles' consciousness was still drifting.

If he stopped focusing, his vision would spin into darkness. And part of him felt like that would be easier.

His temple ringed. *Thump*, thump, it beat, blood pulsing out. Because the windshield glass shattered, the seats were cold. He could feel his body temperature dropping. The control stick was heavy, and he couldn't put strength into his arms. Blood and rain intermingled, making vision difficult.

It'd be easier to just end it, his mind screamed.

"I don't mind being shot down," He whispered to himself. "But Fana's here."

The whispers would never reach the rear seat. He used his whole body to support the control stick, pulling the check helm to the left.

The sound of propellers slicing through rain became closer behind him.

The Shinden were closing in. He didn't have to turn to check. They weren't opponents that could be lost with just one overboost.

It was difficult flying along the ocean. The salty spray poured into the seats. He didn't want to be below the clouds, either. He wanted to go above, to the sun. His body desired it, but his survival instincts vetoed the decision.

If he tried to lift his plane now, along with the drop in speed, he'd simply show the surface of his plane to the enemy, and that would lead to instant death. The only way to survive was to fly at this altitude until he shook off the enemy.

His head hurt, ringing from the pain. His fingertips were becoming numb. Shattered bits of the windshield had gashed his arms. The control stick was incredibly heavy. But if he messed up his control even a bit, he'd plunge into the ocean. All he could do was endure it.

Charles desperately tried to keep his consciousness intact, tried to wake himself up, and felt the killing intents of the pilots behind him.

As the Shindens' 20mm rifles blazed, the Santa Cruz slid sideways on the ocean surface.

The bullets made salty pillars to the left of the plane. He was flying so low he was creating waves.

Fana was still in the back seat, her neck turned as far as it would go as she shouted to Charles.

"Charles, I'm sorry Charles."

Her voice sounded tearful. Fana was drenched by the rain, but her face was covered by stuff that wasn't rain. She knew Charles was gripping the control stick, just a breath away from losing consciousness. But she couldn't just sit and do nothing. The only thing Fana could do was to keep Charles' consciouness intact. To keep talking to him,

without pause.

"I'm so useless. I'm sorry, I'm sorry I'm just baggage." She was saying things that couldn't be helped. But she was afraid that if she stopped talking, Charles would black out entirely.

Every now and then Charles would say something, but she couldn't hear, and acting almost entirely of instict, would slide, crawl, change speeds, and evade bullets coming in from the rear.

Charles' sight, hindered more and more by blood, barely made out the stratocumulus cloud ahead.

That was their only hope.

He was already on the verge of losing himself. But his instincts as a pilot sent the plane toward the mountain of cloud.

The wounded wings of the Santa Cruz sliced through rain. He was so close to blacking out, but Fana's voice kept him awake.

Charles was supported by Fana behind him. In his rain-soaked vision was an image of young Fana, wearing a white one-piece dress.

With a sunflower field behind her, the Fana of the past was crying.

"Come on, Charles."

Charles, soaked in blood, smiled lightly. Maybe this was what they called a 'revolving lantern.' He couldn't tell what was real and what was a dream, but he responded anyways.

"Fana, are you crying?"

He remembered when he was picking on the pig, that she'd asked if he was crying, and he remembered quickly wiping away his tears.

"Yes, I am crying. I'm vexed that I can't do anything. That I can't do anything in a time like this."

Though his vision was blurred, the young Fana's voice sounded clear. The coldness of

the rain and wind faded away, and the voice of Fana, settling in his heart, felt warm.

"I have a request."

"What?"

"Keep talking to me."

"It won't be a bother?"

"Not at all. I feel like I'll black out if I don't listen to you."

"Okay, then what shall we talk about?"

The four Shinden kept pursuing from behind. They were waiting for him to mess up. While Fana spoke, Charles kept his attention focused.

"How troublesome. I've not talked to people much. May I ask about you?"

"Okay, sure."

"Why are you flying?"

Charles answered Fana's question as he weaved in front of the enemy.

"Because I like to."

"You like war?"

"As if. What I like is flying in the sky."

"Of course. Of course that's it."

The 20mm guns from the Shinden roared. But the Santa Cruz was no longer in front of their guns. Hovering over the ocean, the plane slid sideways, kicking up waves. The reason why he was repeating everything over and over again was because this was the most effective way. Charles knew that if he grew irritated, and tried to do something else, he would be shot down.

"In our case, we don't have much of a choice. If a superior orders us, 'fly a plane and fight the enemy,' that's all we can do."

The five Shinden that had crossed over him turned, and charged from the left. The other five planes, including the one that hit Charles, danced down from the right.

"Are you taking me to Esmeralda because you were ordered to?"

Charles' consciousness was blurred, but he still had fully awareness of the situation. Like he had a bird's eye view of his own plane, as well as the enemy planes; it was a strange feeling that guided him.

"That's one reason. But along with that, no one had broken through the central ocean blockade on their own. I wanted to try it. That was a big reason."

The left planes were faster, he decided, and he kicked the right footbar.

"Even though your accomplishments will be sideswiped?"

The plane groaned.

"I don't really care."

The bullets riddled the ocean.

"You don't want fame?"

He could tell they were 7.7mm bullets. The enemy had already run out of 20mm bullets, which weren't as well stocked.

"If they'd give it to me, sure I'd take it, but I don't need it to live."

The planes from the right swooped in. Charles didn't even have to turn to look. Even with his consciousness drifting between this world and the netherworld, he had full grasp of the airspace.

"I wish I could let those around me hear those words."

The plane slid parallel to the ocean surface. The enemy bullets didn't even graze the Santa Cruz.

The enemy planes that swooped changed to an ascent barely over the ocean.

"When you fly for as long as I have, you start losing interest in the value system of the

surface. Most pilots think the same way as me."

The last plane didn't make it, crashed into the ocean, and was swallowed up, its jet-black wing spiraling in the air with a big splash.

"The sky is a treasure to Charles."

Blood still oozed out of his temple, and he couldn't put any strength into the arms holding onto the control stick, but Charles' consciousness was relatively awake.

"That sounds pretty cool."

Charles joked.

"I was being serious."

Fana pouted.

"There are times I feel the surface is stupid. Social classes don’t exist in the sky."

His vision was filled with rain. It was limited. But Charles could clearly hear the breaths, the heartbeats of the enemy pilots.

The Shinden pilots were in a rush. The dogfight had gone on longer than expected, and they were afraid of chasing the Santa Cruz for much longer. They wouldn't say anything to each other, but Charles was sure they were trying to see if it was time to give up.

"You're right, I agree."

The Santa Cruz was dancing with the Shinden.

"After all, a refugee bestado is speaking with the empress-to-be."

No matter how much the Shinden fired, their actions were read two, three steps ahead. The bullets would miss, evaded. It was so futile you'd wonder why they were aiming for him at all.

"Are we not supposed to speak?"

And … the Santa Cruz finally made it to the stratocumulus cloud.

This airspace was dominated by rain and wind that was incomparably harsher than before. If they were to enter the clouds, the air would be split by the strong ascending and descending air currents. Only the most confident of pilots would dare to cut through.

Charles simply kept flying over the ocean, through the storm, because that made it difficult for the enemy to give chase. He wanted to fly into the cloud afterward, forcing the enemy into even more dangerous air, to make them want to give up.

Big raindrops and loud, crashing waves swept into the seats. Without the voice pipe, they wouldn't be able to continue to speak.

Knowing that, Fana shouted to Charles anyways, words that would never reach.

"You're a person, just as I am."

As she spoke, log-shaped lightning flashed outside the windshield. After a slight delay, the sound of thunder rumbled, and the shadow of the Santa Cruz was engraved into the waves.

Charles didn't reply. But, having been able to say what she'd wanted to say since the journey had started, Fana was satisfied. Rain, wind, lightning – none of it scared Fana anymore. She understood, without any reason to back it up, that they would be able to keep flying together.

"We're passing the cloud," Charles mumbled.

After that, like someone had lowered the curtains, bright sunlight poured into the seats.

The world, that all along had been one dreary ashen color, was suddenly filled with light, looking brighter and more colorful than ever before, and the summer sky flew into Fana's eyes.

"Wow," She blurted out. It was a sudden, abrupt change of scenery.

In front of her, behind the plane, the stratucumulus cloud they'd flown under drifted away, reflecting sunlight. The top of the cloud was like a silver-white steeple, standing tall as Fana looked up. The pure white was comforting in the clear, summer blue.

And, those nefarious black shadows were nowhere to be seen. The color of relief spread across Fana's face.

"Look, the enemies are gone. They must have given up."

"Yes, it looks like it," Charles rasped, not looking back.

"Charles?"

Charles sounded weaker than before. Fana looked over her shoulder, and her eyes widened.

"Oh no!"

She hadn’t noticed in the dark clouds; Charles' wounds were far deeper than she'd thought. Blood was still oozing out of his right temple, and shattered bits of glass were gouged into his face and shoulders. His flight suit, a clean blue at dawn, was covered in red on his right side. And the hands gripping the control stick were, probably due to glass, dripping blood, his breath inconsistent. It looked like the control stick weighed tons.

Charles, in a state halfway between death and life, had flown through a thunder cloud, avoiding thousands of enemy bullets. Fana couldn't believe it.

"I-I'm sorry, I never realized."

Devastated, she wriggled about, trying to find anything that would work as wrapping.

Noticing the parachute being used as a cushion, she sliced it apart with a piece of glass and leaned into the front seat.

"This should do for now. We'll have to patch you up properly, later."

Forcibly twisting herself around in the seat, Fana wrapped up Charles' bleeding temple. She then plucked out the glass that was stuck in him, one by one. Fana's hands, which had never lifted anything heavier than forks and knives, were immediately cut, and tainted the colour of roses.

"Fana, I'm alright."

"Please, let me do this, at least."

Fana poked her hand out of the broken windshield and tossed out the glass shards. Blood and glass formed a helix as they spiraled past the plane.

"Fana."

"What?"

"Your hands are hurt."

"You're hurt, too."

"I'm fine, but not you."

"Why?"

"Because you're going to become the empress."

"Oh my, Charles, aren't you the one who said there are no social classes in the sky?"

"Well, but-"

Charles swallowed his words.

In front of him, through his blurred vision, an abnormality came into sight.

The Santa Cruz was flying at about 120 meters altitude. Far below them was a wall of ocean water.

The wall stretched left and right, without end. And the edge couldn't be seen through the spraying water.

It was a big step in the middle of what had been a flat ocean. The ocean was sliced in one line; water was falling from the higher end to the lower end, and water sprayed through the air.

"The Great Fall. We've finally made it."

There was relief in Charles' struggling voice. Once past the fall, they'd enter airspace which Levahm and Amatsukami forces fought over. They were no longer in airspace completely dominated by the Amatsukami.

Charles wrapped his right leg over the control stick and pulled it forward. His arms

were so weak now that this was the only way to move the heavy stick. The plane painfully pointed upwards, and with a groan of the propeller, ascended.

Fana's eyes were glued to the wall of water. The Great Fall was roughly 1,300 meters in height, and there was a rainbow in the middle. The heavy rumbling of falling water vibrated through the plane.

This wasn't the first time Fana had seen this. She'd flown across many times and seen this . But every time, she'd feel a sense of awe.

Because of the existence of the Great Fall, the world had been split in two for a long time, and until the invention of planes, could not be crossed. At the same time, this waterfall was why flight supplanted sea travel in the transportation of cargo, and in the control of water-and¬airspace.

If the waterfall didn't exist, flight technology would certainly not have advanced as much as it had now. Regular ships were far more effective and efficient in the transportation of cargo. Although they could travel greater distances and carry more weight, they could not overcome the Great Fall.

The Santa Cruz spiraled up and climbed over the Great Fall.

They were now in the western ocean. Charles once again brought the plane down toward the surface, wiped away blood from his eyes, and looked at the altitude gauge. Even though the ocean was right under them, it read 1,350 meters. After adjusting the gauge with his finger to read 10, he returned to a higher altitude.

Charles wanted to sleep. If he stopped focusing, he'd lose consciousness and immediately drift away. The lack of oxygen from being in a higher altitude, the loss of blood from wounds, and the energy loss from intense concentration; all of these were making him extremely drowsy.

Forcing sleep away, he looked across the ocean.

He needed to find Sierra Cadis somewhere in this ocean. Yet there was no land to be found on this lonesome ocean.

Until now, all Charles needed to do was fly northwest, because eventually he'd run into the Great Fall. The Sierra Cadis was supposed to be the next landmark for him.

He knew there would be islands to the northeast and southwest of where he was, but

he didn't know which way to go. He would have to fly along the Great Fall, using the shape of the fall, the shape of the clouds, the colour of the ocean surface, and other such markings to figure out where he was.

Eventually, the sun began to set, and the sky was slowly stained an indigo-blue.

And at the edge of his blurred vision, he found a gathering of islands.

The resting place for the third night, the Sierra Cadis archipelago, seventeen islands of various sizes. He'd be able to rest in relative safety.

Licking dry lips, he used the last of his energy, lowering his plane into the ocean between islands that glittered silver.

The Santa Cruz plunged toward a green island, surrounded by shallow water.

They'd survived another day. He'd thought it was over so many times, and had been so close to giving up. But here he was, still flying. And Fana was still alive. The recon plane Santa Cruz had managed to survive an enemy fleet and fourteen enemy Shinden.

Charles thought about that with his freezing mind and smiled, satisfied. After a look at the silver ocean under him, he let go of of the control stick, switched the battery stack to "recharge," sighed, and fell into a deep, deep slumber.

Chapter 7

With a ragged, red-stained Charles on her back, Fana took one step, then another step onto the white beach.

The sky above was a light, transparent red.

The sun, was a ball of magma hovering just over the horizon, and turned the clouds floating over the island crimson.

There were some palm trees near the end of the beach. Fana carried Charles to them, and then laid him down on white sand.

Gasping, she turned him face-up, then collapsed next to him. The past three days she'd been either in the air or on the water, so she was thankful for the firm ground.

A salt-scented wind swept by. Her ragged breath slowly calmed down, and only the sound of the waves reached her ears.

Fana sat up, looked sadly at the bloodied form of Charles, and combed some dried blood from his hair. The nylon fabric she'd hastily wrapped around him was already stained with blood.

Getting up, she rummaged through the enclosure of the Santa Cruz, and brought out what she found, laying it on the ground. Emergency tools were in a wooden box, wired tightly to make sure they'd survive the rough conditions of flight. Finding emergency first aid kits in the box, she felt relief.

However, Fana had never patched anyone up before.

She sat down next to Charles and peeled off the parachute nylon that was haphazardly wrapped around his head. The underside of the nylon was soaked in blood. After a moment’s shock, she pressed a gauze with disinfectant to the wound, and wrapped it anew. After a few times doing this, she didn't want to say it was good, but she thought her work was at least satisfactory.

Charles continued sleeping. She touched his face; it was neither hot nor cold. One night's rest would make him perfectly fine tomorrow she thought, trying to cheer

herself up, and then stepped into the thicket of palm trees with a tin bucket in one hand.

She needed water to wash away Charles' blood.

Stepping through the thick green ground, she passed by big, crooked ferns and suspiciously-colored vegetation, and found a swamp filled with black water. Not trusting its looks, she braved onward.

It was getting dark. She started hearing sounds she'd never heard before. She looked around, feeling like she was being watched, when she saw a big monkey sitting on a bent part of a tree, staring at her with eyes glistening gold from the moonlight.

Stifling a scream, she turned her back to the monkey and kept walking. She wanted to turn back, but she felt like she'd find water just a bit deeper in. Pressed onward by her intuition, the thicket came to an end, and a new beach entered her vision.

She looked beyond the beach; far, far away, the sun was snuggling down behind the green mountain range. The dimming light shone through the connected peaks and valleys, and rays of light poked up toward the clouds.

And between the two humps was one stream of water, passing by the beach in front of Fana, and going toward the ocean. The sky reflected off of the clear water.

"Ahh, God, thank you."

Falling to her knees, she clasped her hands over her breast and spoke the words of gratitude.

Struggling, constantly out of breath, Fana managed to return through the thicket of palm trees carrying the bucket full of water.

The sun had fallen by the time she reached Charles, the beach glimmering in the moonlight. Lukewarm air surrounded them. Night was cold on the ocean surface, but there wasn't as much a worry of cold on this island.

She lit a tallow candle with a match and propped it up with sand. Then, she dipped a rag into the water, and began wiping blood from Charles' face. Then, blushing, she took off his flight suit, cleaned the wounds he'd gotten from the glass shards with brandy, and applied a gauze to them.

Charles' expression peaceful. His breathing was calm. Thinking he'd be fine if he

were left in peace, after patching up his body, Fana covered him with a blanket.

Sounds from the island died away.

She could hear neither birds nor waves. Just the ocean, sky, stars, and moon, and Charles.

Fana sat down next to Charles and stared at the waves biting at the beach.

A gust of summer night wind swept by. The afternoon heat was still in the sand, and the static air still held warmth.

She was free to do as she wished at this moment. Time she had to herself, without anyone watching, time that never existed in Rio de Este.

Fana returned to the back seat of the Santa Cruz, changed into her swimsuit, and jumped into the night ocean.

The water was warm and comfortable on her skin.

Treading water, she calmly gazed at the night stars, floating among the waves.

The sharp moonlight descended onto her white body.

She'd braced herself for death so many times that day. But she survived. And now she was swimming in the night ocean.

Spreading out her arms and legs, she looked at the starry night, and decided.

"I'm going to change."

Whispering that to herself, something heavy, deep down in her soul, melted away.

Restless, she returned to the beach and, still in her swimsuit, sat down next to Charles.

With a look of determination, she let down her tied hair. Then, lifting up the scissors she used to cut up bandages, she brought the blades to her silver, thread-like hair.

The cut strands danced and vanished into the night breeze, toward the ocean.

The golden moonlight slid across her hair, sliding down to her chin.

Finished, she brushed her hair with one hand. Long enough to reach her waist just moments ago, her hair was now neck-length through her fingers.

With no mirror, she couldn't see how she looked, but it was enough to serve as a ritual for her rebirth.

"How does it look?" She smiled mischievously at Charles. No response. Fana reached out and pinched his cheek. Charles, sleeping with an innocent look, was pinched in the cheek.

Pulling her hand away, she whispered, "I'm living, thanks to you."

It was an honest thought.

And as she said that, she was filled with misery.

Her heart wrenched at her, hurting. And from that pain she was filled with an emotion she'd never felt before.

It was a feeling she'd felt for the first time in her life, a bitter, but sweet feeling that was both painful and comfortable.

Fana didn't know what to do. So covering herself in a blanket, she laid down next to Charles.

Only the sound of Charles' sleeping breath was audible in the tropical night.

Fana waited for sleep, listening to that breath. Emotions burst forth from her heart, crashing against each other, denying sleep.

"Charles." Unable to hold herself any longer, she called his name. Rolling over, she gazed at his face, under the moonlight. Her heart began to hurt more.

"Charles," She called out again. No response. She wanted to reach out and embrace him, push her face into his back, and sleep.

And when she realized what she was thinking, she blushed and turned away from Charles, curling up and ducking her head beneath her blanket.

She could hear her heart pounding. With embarrassment firmly in her mind, she screwed her eyes shut, and awaited sleep.

The morning that came from the horizon pierced the ocean mist and illuminated the beach Charles and Fana were on.

Charles was the first to wake up.

Wincing at the strong light directly leaping into his face, he shook his head lightly, and tried to sit up, when his whole body felt wracked with pain.

"Uggh." He groaned, touched the wound on his head, and noticed the bandage awkwardly wrapped around it.

At his side was Fana, curled up in her blanket with her back to him, sleeping calmly.

Charles absent-mindedly looked at Fana, then the beach, his gaze sweeping across the palm tree thicket, as he traced through his memory.

They'd flown right into the middle of an enemy fleet, were chased by kuurai, then Shinden…and he suffered head trauma in the middle of the latter.

His memory after that was hazy. He remembered desperately listening to Fana, and relying on his physical memory. Heavy rain poured into the seats, and it was tough holding the control stick. He'd given up on living numerous times.

He didn't remember how they shook the Shinden. He vaguely remembered passing the Great Fall and finding Sierra Cadis. But beyond that, nothing, no matter how hard he tried.

Somehow managing to stand on the sand, he did a light stretch. He finally realized he had innumerable wounds all over his bare upper body. Probably the shattered glass. But they were all disinfected. Fana had no doubt patched him up. Feeling grateful yet remorseful for troubling her so, he looked down at Fana, curled up in her blanket.

He felt incredibly hungry. He lacked blood.

Drinking from his water flask, he took dried bread from the emergency tools laid out on the sand, and bit into it. Then, putting on his flight suit, he walked across the beach.

The waves swept over his ankles, and he gazed at the horizon, absent-mindedly.

"I'm still alive." Confirming this by speaking aloud, he felt the thick, misty air and the

lukewarm wind on his face. The sun was rising over the horizon, and blue was beginning to dominate the red.

Then, a voice from behind.

"Good morning, Charles."

When he turned around, he saw Fana standing at the edge of the waves in her flight suit, smiling at him.

Charles' eyes widened; Fana's hair was cut so that it only reached her chin.

"My Lady, your hair?"

"I cut it, because it was getting in the way. How does it look?"

Charles gulped. It suited her far more than when her hair was tied up. But he didn't know how to put that opinion into words, so he just silently nodded.

"How are you? Are you okay walking?"

"Y-Yes, umm, did my Lady do the bandaging?"

"I'm sorry they're clumsily done. I'd never done it before."

"No, it’s actually done quite well. I'm amazed."

Fana looked at him with doubt, then smiled, mischievously.

"Charles, do you remember yesterday?"

"What? Uh, umm, did I do something rude?"

"Hmm, rude…well if what you said was a lie, then that would definitely be rude."

"Umm, I, what...?"

"You really don't remember? 'Social classes don’t exist in the sky.' You said that to me as we were being chased. If that was a lie, then I shall have to hate you."

Charles desperately tried to recall what happened the day before.

As Fana said, he vaguely remembered conversing as the Shinden chased them. Right, because Fana's voice was like a magic spell, holding him in place and giving him enough strength to handle the control stick. And then-

Charles blushed. Then, after struggling with words, he made excuses.

"I'm sorry, Lady. I was confused, then. Umm, so, I ended up speaking to you like a friend-"

"I don't mind."

"No, but I do. It was my mistake. Calling the Lady by her name although I'm not in any position to do that. I'm deeply, deeply sorry."

Fana looked displeased at his apologies.

"So that was a lie?"

"Not really a lie, so much as wishful thinking by one mercenary. There's no need for the Lady to take it seriously."

"I'll decide whether to take it seriously or not. I'm quite enamored by this manner of thought," Fana said, firmly. Unlike yesterday, this was a Fana that could and would speak her mind. That, along with her cut hair, made her seem like a completely different person.

"I am honored by the praise. But let's not talk about it anymore. There are lots of things to do today."

Forcing the conversation to end, Charles walked past Fana and returned to the beach. Fana stared at his back, disapprovingly.

Charles swung his injured body into the plane, Fana behind him, and they took off. Taking a more careful look at the archipelago, he found flat ground that they could land on. He descended then, and slowly nudged the plane to the edge of a pine tree thicket, covering it with leaves and branches he'd gathered with Fana, to camouflage it from above.

After that, they went to work on plane maintenance. He deftly removed the metal hydride battery stack and cleaned the tank, suction cup, and ejection chute. Fana

picked up shattered glass that had landed on the seat, fitted a backup windshield that had been kept in the enclosure, and wiped clean the instruments Charles had taken apart.

Her mood lightened gradually as they worked. At first, she made fun of Charles' incredibly polite, respectful manner of speech, but she slowly gave up on changing that, and while she awkwardly did her share of the work, talked casually.

That last night, she'd gone to get water on her own, that she'd swam in the ocean at night, that she cut her hair because she wanted to be born anew; Fana spoke, wanting responses from Charles.

He, in turn, kept the conversation flowing and, wiping away sweat with his sleeves, completed maintenance as the sun passed the southern pinnacle.

"Are you hungry?"

"Actually, I'm quite starved, as I haven't eaten anything since last night."

"Same. Lets go fishing in that river, then."

Charles plucked two fishing rods from the enclosure and carried them over his shoulder. Fana smiled and ran across the grass plain.

"Hurry, Charles."

After turning around once to shout to him, she kept running.

Colorful butterflies flitted about the flowers on the plain. Thick, green mountains surrounded them, making the plains look like a secluded garden. And passing through the palm tree thicket at the edge of the plains, they reached a river flowing from the mountains.

Big, bumpy stones protruded from the river bank and the river itself. It was shallow enough that you could simply walk across it. The riverbed was filled with rounded stones, and blue fish could be seen swimming against the current. The summer sun carved shadows of the fish into the riverbed. Thick, green-colored trees dotted the other side of the river, and some light pink birds with oddly-shaped beaks cried weird sounds. Harsh sunlight dominated most of the sight, and the complex shadows born from the sunlight was easy on the eyes.

"Wow, what a beautiful river," Fana said to Charles, who arrived a moment later.

"Quite a wonderful place. Shall we camp here tonight?"

"Marvelous."

Fana took her fishing rod, sat down on a large stone protruding from the river bank, and threw the hook in. Charles also flung his baited steel fishing rod into the clean river, propped the rod up in the river bank, and rolled onto his back.

The blue sky filled his vision.

The clear azure, the pure white clouds, the colors were engraved into Charles' sight. It was an endless summer landscape.

The spell of stasis, held by the season of summer, soaked into his brain, and even the conservative Charles felt a certain rush of freedom.

Still lying down, he looked at Fana, sitting on the stone and watching her line. She had a soft expression as she concentrated on the river.

How peaceful, Charles thought.

He was tired of a sky filled with bullets and kuurai. He didn't want to see more masses of people being dumped into the ocean from an airship split in two. He was tired of explosions and anti-air gunfire and metal spinning out of control.

Charles just wanted to fly.

How wonderful could it be if he could just fly, without caring about enemies or allies, with Fana in the back seat.

If he could, with Fana, pass through countless cloud steeples, cut through torn-up clouds, ride on the wind, and fly wherever, forever.

But realizing what he was dreaming about, Charles shut down his imagination.

He was confused about Fana's existence in his dreams.

He dreamed about flying without limits. There was no need for Fana in that dream. She was the imperial prince's fiancée, after all, and had nothing to do with an orphan-

turned-pilot.

He had to remember his place.

Charles kept repeating that to himself. Part of his heart strained against that oppression, but he sealed that up with force. He was afraid of dancing to the tune of his own shallow thoughts.

Then, Fana looked at him. Their eyes locked. His heart jumped.

"Charles, it's being pulled."

"What?"

"Your fishing rod. Get up, hurry!"

He glanced at the rod propped up in the river bed. It was being tugged here and there. He hurriedly got up and pulled the rod; he had hooked two large char.

"Ah, I got something, too," Fana shouted from her stone seat. Her fishing rod was also bending violently. After a moment, along with a white spray, the fish caught on Fana's fishing rod was pulled out of the water. Her joyful shout bounced off the surrounding rocks.

After gathering branches and leaves from the pine tree thicket and lighting it with a yellow phosphorous match, he placed round stones on the fire. He then placed the salted Char on the glowing-red stones. After a short wait, a savory scent drifted into Fana's nose.

"Thanks for the meal."

She grabbed the Char's head and tail, and bit right into it. The savory, roasted skin along with the oily fish meat, went straight into her stomach. The fresh fish nurtured by clean, unpolluted water brought a smile to Fana's face.

"This is wonderful, Charles. Maybe you should quit being a pilot and become a cook?"

"I'll think about it."

"May I say something shameful? I want to eat more."

"What a coincidence, I thought the same."

The two of them threw their lines back into the river, and resumed eating. Because these islands were not frequented by people, even fake bait was enough to catch fish at an amusing rate.

Fana and Charles feasted on the river fish to their hearts' content. At some point, he even forgot about his wounds, and was gobbling prey like an animal trying to recuperate from blood-loss. She, in turn, looked happily at Charles from the side, and was satisfied by the meal under the sun.

But there were rude intruders upon that carefree time of theirs.

Instinctively, Charles looked up at the sky. An ominous propeller sound descended from the blue. Charles looked at Fana and firmly said to her.

"That sounds bad. My Lady, let's hide under the trees."

Both of them scurried like wild rabbits, flinging themselves into the pine tree thicket by the river.

Charles glared in the direction of the noise. At about a 500 meter altitude, an Amatsukami patrol plane was scouring the island.

The plane cruised over the island, as if licking it, and then moved over to the next island.

Fana furrowed her eyebrows and asked, "What was that?"

"An Amatsukami reconnaissance plane. The fleet we ran from yesterday is probably parked in the area. They probably know we're on Sierra Cadis, because of flight limitations."

"I guess we can't stay here forever."

"Even if they know we're on the archipelago, they don't know which island we're on. They're probably still using reconnaissance planes to scout the ten or so islands. Eventually they'll start landing, if they have an idea of where we are, but we should be safe for one or two days."

Fana anxiously looked at the sky. Charles thought for a moment, then continued.

"It's highly probable that the enemy's surrounded the archipelago. Aside from the ones trying to find us by flying over us, there should be some waiting for us to take off. This has become quite a situation."

"So it's dangerous to stay, but also dangerous to leave?"

"Yes. We particularly need the sky to be cloudy to leave. If we take off in clear weather, a recon plane will immediately see us and contact the fleet, and we'll be hounded by Shinden again."

“What a bother," Charles muttered. Then he noticed Fana's expression was darkening. It was probably heavy on her, as she'd just discovered the fearsomeness of aerial combat yesterday.

"The plane is hidden pretty well, so unless we mess up big-time, we should be safe on this island for a day or two. We just need to run into the tree shades whenever we hear propellers. There's no need to be overly scared." He forced a smile, to cheer her up.

The sun was beginning to set when Fana, who'd been lying by the riverside, suddenly remembered something and made a suggestion.

"Charles, shall we do some mountain-climbing?"

"What?"

"When we were looking down from the plane, I saw something yellow on the other side of the mountain. I wanted to know what that was."

She was pointing at a bowl-shaped mountain. It was covered by short grass, and didn't look like a difficult climb.

"Ahh, it's a clump of wild flowers. It's not that rare."

"It's rare to me. Come on, can we go?"

Not having any reason to refuse, they crossed the river using stepping stones, walked through a dense forest, and made it to the foothills.

Panting, Fana started up the slope. While moving forward, she looked behind her often, both to gaze at the landscape that included the river they'd been fishing in hours ago, and to look at Charles, faithfully following her.

Sunlight shone from the side. Sweat glistened on Fana's pure, white skin. As the slope reached its end, Fana began running, and looked down from the mountain she'd climbed.

"Amazing." Fana's whisper was swallowed up by the wind that came from the beach and blew up the mountain.

The foot of the mountain was covered completely by the yellow petals of wild flowers and the watery, thick green color of grass. At the far end of the foot was a cliff, and beyond it was the ultramarine ocean, the silhouette of white cumulonimbus clouds floating over the horizon.

The heavy scent of grass flowed into her nose. White butterflies flitted between the tens of thousands of petals. Every time the ocean breeze blew, the field of flowers bent one way, and the sunlight beaming down was deflected by the petals and leaves, scattering the glittering light as far as the eye could see.

With the landscape of abundance in front of her, Fana simply stood, breath-taken, before finally taking a step into the garden of flowers. By the time Charles had reached the top, Fana had already plowed right into the yellow field.

This time it was Charles' turn to be breath-taken.

The clear, blue sky, the lulling ocean, the chain of cumulonimbus clouds, the garden of flowers – all of it served to make Fana del Moral even more beautiful.

Blown by a soft wind, her chin-length silver-white hair, her silver-white eyes, her pure-white skin, the white flight-suit… Fana's appearance, devoid of color, looked like something cut out of this world amidst the sea of color.

Charles couldn't step into that scene. If he tried, the perfection of the scene would be cracked and shattered.

But Fana had no idea what Charles was thinking. Noticing him standing, dumbfounded, she turned around and smiled innocently.

"See, isn't it amazing?"

"Beyond my imagination."

"I feel like my soul's being bathed. Lets have a walk."

Holding down her wind-blown hair with one hand, she urged Charles onwards.

The two of them walked through the garden of wild flowers together. As they absent¬mindedly conversed, they walked straight through the field, and arrived at the cliff.

Standing at the greenery of the cliff, Fana stared at the blue horizon.

The sun, beginning to tilt, was radiating its brass color before Fana. If they flew west, toward the sun, they'd arrive at the imperial capital Esmeralda, where the imperial prince Carlo was waiting.

Fana's face darkened. She turned to Charles. Standing behind her like an obedient servant, he looked at her with worry.

"Is something wrong?"

"Nothing." Fana hurriedly adopted a stoic facade, and looked at the horizon again.

Charles quietly gazed at Fana's back.

Fana wanted to say something, Charles felt. But he didn't inquire. He felt it wasn't his position to do so.

Gradually, the sun fell, and the western sky was stained red. Fana, who'd been silent, turned to Charles,

"Are you bored?"

"No, not at all."

"I want to be here, a bit longer."

"As my Lady wishes."

Fana smiled faintly, then sat down on the grass, legs stretched out in front of her.

A seagull cut across the western sky, its white wings taut. The underbelly of the cloud

over them had become red.

Charles wordlessly stood behind Fana. Still gazing at the sun that was setting, Fana pointed to the space next to her.

"Would you like to sit?"

After a moments' hesitation, Charles did as he was told, and sat down next to Fana.

"Thank you for listening to my selfishness."

"I'm used to it."

Fana smiled at Charles' light joke.

The two of them sat about a half-a-step apart, and gazed at the red-stained clouds, at the sky that was clinging onto shreds of blue.

The sound of waves came from across the cliff. The scent of the summer night was mixed into the wind.

"It feels so good," Fana whispered. She laid down on the grass. "It really feels so good," She repeated, still staring up. The clouds in the sky were all turning the color of the evening.

"Charles?"

"Yes?"

"I feel like we've met once before, a long time ago. Am I imagining things?" Fana, still lying down and staring up, asked him. A strong star was glimmering in the east.

Charles hesitated, unsure how to answer.

But he thought there was nothing to hide. So he decided to answer honestly.

"Actually, we have met, a long, long time ago. You probably don't remember, but when I was a kid, I was a garden-hand at House del Moral."

"What?"

"My mother was a maid at the mansion, so I lived in the little shed in the garden. I

wasn't ever in a position to see the Lady, but once, we met, when I was picking on a pig. You scolded me, saying don't pick on weak things."

Charles chuckled at the memory.

Fana sat up, opened her eyes, and stared at Charles' face. She was desperately going through her childhood memories, but she couldn't remember.

"I'm sorry, I don't remember."

"No surprise, it was a very short meeting."

"But still. That you used to work at my house…"

"Yes. I worked at that house for about two years. When I was nine, my mother was forced out of the mansion for disobeying Duke Diego. The Lady was six at the time, so it's not likely you remember."

"Wait, Charles, was your mother Amatsuvian?"

"You remember? Yes, she was skinny, and pockmarked, but she was kind."

"My. Oh dear."

Fana's trembling voice portrayed her shock. Charles kept talking, with a smile.

"Even after we were forced out of the mansion, my mother was always proud of what she'd done. She was happy the Lady kept eagerly listening to Amatsukami stories. But she regretted not being able to say farewell."

"Charles, but that… that's-"

Droplets streamed down Fana's cheeks. One, two, countless droplets slid to her chin.

Charles knew his mother had gone against the duke's orders, and had told stories to Fana.

Fana's tears told Charles the two were far closer than he'd ever known.

"She treated me very well. In that cold mansion, she was the only one that was warm. And she was forced out because of me. I…I don't know how to apologize."

"My mother did it of her own accord. There's no need for the Lady to fret over it."

"Is she still well?" Still crying, Fana choked out the words.

"She died of illness five years ago. It was a peaceful, painless death," Charles lied. She had actually been stabbed and killed by a molester soon after being forced out, but there was no need to tell the truth.

"How horrible, that's too fast. I'll pray for your mother from now on."

"My mother will be grateful. I actually had no idea the Lady and my mother were that close."

"I don't have happy memories of my childhood. I only remember being taught to become a doll for father. But I remember your mother telling me stories as I lay in bed. The time before I slept was the happiest I ever was."

"Is that so? Mother is probably smiling happily in heaven, hearing those words. Maybe she guided me to be here like this, too."

"I'm… overwhelmed, I don't know what to say. I didn't know something this unbelievable was possible…that Charles is her son. I should have paid more attention to poetry lessons. Maybe I'd be more able to say what I'm feeling."

"I understand how you feel. Both my mother and I. Please wipe your tears. They should be kept until you reach the imperial capital in safety."

Fana tried to do as he said, tried to stifle her tears. But she couldn't stop. She rolled onto her back and covered her eyes with both hands, trying to resist the feelings that welled up.

Charles' expression loosened, and he gazed at the reddening sky. He quietly sat at Fana's side until she stopped crying.

The eldest daughter of House del Moral, which essentially reigned over San Martilia and everything regarding it, probably should have looked at one servant as a disposable tool. The kindness she exhibited as she cried for his mother seeped into his soul.

He wanted to see an empire led by her as the empress. For that, he'd have to overcome everything tomorrow.

Even if he died, he would bring Fana to the imperial prince Carlo, Charles vowed to himself again.

But as he re-affirmed his vow, pain streaked through his heart.

He was surprised at the unexpected feeling, and a bit stunned. Of course, he knew immediately he was envious of the imperial prince.

And the fact that he was envious of the imperial prince hurt Charles' pride. A mere refugee, being envious of a man who would be entrusted with leading the Levahm Empire of over 210,000,000 people, was unbelievably stupid. It was beyond simply knowing his place.

“I'm a lost cause,” He muttered to himself. He was irritated. He felt like a child undergoing puberty, going up and down with Fana's every action.

Fana is the imperial prince Carlo's fiancée.

He re-iterated the fact to himself.

Charles Karino was executing the mission to re-unite the imperial prince, was entrusted with the future of the Levahm Empire, with his fiancée. Nothing more, nothing less.

He understood that … but his heart still hurt.

I'm so stupid. He silently derided himself. That night, as he lay on top of pebbles, he covered himself in a blanket and continued berating himself.

Sleep didn't come quickly.

The flight plan he'd drawn up in his head was replaced by the silhouette of Fana, and the imperial prince Carlo played around with it, slowly staining it with his color.

The pain in his heart was relentless. Finally, Charles got up, swigged some brandy, and relied on alcohol to sleep. It wasn't really a good way to go about it, but otherwise it seemed like he'd struggle to sleep all the way to the morning.

But just a tiny bit of alcohol simply pressed his imagination onward. Cornered by his mind, he screwed his eyes shut and poured more amber-colored liquid into his stomach from the bottle.

‘Drunk’, would describe Charles as he fell asleep. Half the bottle had been emptied.

Chapter 8

Huge sprays of water reflected the light of the southern sun.

Fana pushed through the clear water with her arms, kicking forward with her long legs. When she touched a round riverside stone with one hand, she popped her head out of the water.

"This feels great," She said happily, and then started cutting backwards through the water.

Fana was wearing her audacious white bikini. Her long limbs moved smoothly through the water, forming ripples that radiated from her back and hips.

"Charles, you should swim, too." Treading water near the center of the river, Fana shouted to Charles, lying down on the riverside.

I'll pass, he seemed to want to say, as he waved his hand while still lying down like a stone-cooked char. With a shy smile, she relaxed her arms and legs, drifted face-up, and looked at the sky.

Today was probably a God-given day of blessing. After gratefully giving thanks to the heavens beyond, Fana let her bare skin feel the comfortable summer sun.

That morning – even some time after Fana had awakened – Charles continued to sleep, snoring. At his side was a half-empty bottle of brandy. She could smell the alcohol on him.

Fana didn't wake him up. He was probably tired from the stress of flying for so many days, and he was still hurt. Thinking it would be better to let him sleep, she changed into her swimming suit to swim until he woke up.

By the time the sun had climbed to the middle of the sky, Charles woke up with a brutal hangover. Narrowing his yellowed eyes and hiding his face from the strong sun, he held a hand against the temple that wasn't hurt.

"I'm sorry, My Lady. This is my fault. Because I messed up my body, we have to postpone our flight."

Heavy doses of alcohol particularly affect the eyes. Normally Charles could see planes from over one thousand meters away, but he couldn't in his current state.

Fana beamed and accepted his apology, and she danced back to the river and started swimming again. She was absolutely ecstatic that she could stay in this paradise with Charles for one more day.

They stuck fish through some bamboo spikes, put them around a fire, and ate lunch.

Charles still felt ill, but the pure meat of river fish settled easily in his stomach, and the more he ate the less his head hurt.

Fana remained in her swimsuit as she ate. Usually she would never show her skin to a man, but the intense heat that covered the island burned away those thoughts.

The brilliance and silhouette of Fana's body, sitting on the river beach, leaped into Charles' eyes. But it didn't fill him with vulgar thoughts. Instead it just made him feel more lively.

"Charles should swim, too." After eating, Fana lay down on the round stone, her wet back to the sun, and glanced at Charles, who'd sat down next to her.

Charles bit his lip and shook his head.

"I'm going to hold onto my energy. I need to fly at full strength tomorrow. Even though we've overcome the most difficult part so far, I don't want to let up and make everything go to waste."

Fana sighed at Charles' stiff answer, folded her arms under her cheek, and closed her eyes. "Boring."

"Boring is fine. Once we break through the blockade tomorrow, my efforts will finally be rewarded."

"Speaking of which, Charles, about breaking the blockade tomorrow…" Fana kept her eyes closed, and spoke without turning to face Charles. "Teach me how to shoot that gun."

Charles looked dubiously at Fana's vibrant back. Droplets glistened on the seductive arch from her hip to her buttocks.

"Do you mean the machine gun?"

"Is that its name? I tried to shoot it two days ago when we were being chased, but it didn't fire."

"That's... because the safety was on."

"If I take that off, it'll shoot?"

"Yes, it would, but..."

Charles' voice trailed off. He welcomed the idea of an active backseat gun, but he also didn't want the empress-to-be to be firing it. The backseat machine gun was there for the purpose of shooting down planes pursuing from behind. Single-seat fighters with wing-mounted guns would prefer to aim at the Santa Cruz from behind. Having a gun pointed at them would prevent them from taking such textbook measures.

In the two weeks leading up to their departure, the flight chief who'd trained Fana explained he didn't train her in firing a gun because he feared she'd shoot out the Santa Cruz' own wings. That made sense, except that placing stoppers would alleviate that fear. Obviously that limited the rotation of the gun, but he knew it was already difficult aiming sideways. Actually, even attempting to do so was like a waste of ammunition.

All active pilots knew that the machine gun was most useful in combat when locked into place with stoppers. That's why avoiding use of the backseat gun for fear of shooting out the wings wasn't very persuasive.

Most likely the House del Moral simply didn't want to stain Fana's hands with blood. Of course, Charles knew there were two sides to that. The other, less obvious side, was that House del Moral didn't believe the Santa Cruz, much less Fana, would ever be subject to danger.

He closed his eyes, thinking.

Enemy recon planes were hovering over the Sierra Cadis archipelago. Even today, two scout planes had flown over their island. Most likely, once he took off, the enemy would be alerted, and Shinden would give chase.

If Fana were to shoot, even if she didn't hit anything, the enemy Shinden wouldn't be able to comfortably follow his tail, and wouldn't be able to maintain their formation like they had two days ago. And that day, he had the help of a stratocumulus cloud;

there was no guarantee of there being another. There was nothing to lose by being over-prepared.

He opened his eyes, decision made.

"Kyaaaaaaaaaaaa!"

The 7.7mm rear machine gun blazed, along with a scream.

Some tens of bullets were fired from the grounded Santa Cruz into the thicket, startling some tropical birds into the sky.

After glancing at the gun, which was emitting a bluish-purple smoke, Fana turned around to look at Charles, seated in the front seat, half-way to tears. She was wearing her flight-suit.

Charles was resting his stomach against the seat, and judged her aim.

"Not bad. You were able to fire."

"Really?"

"Yes, it was good. This time, try aiming a bit higher."

All he could do was give tiny pointers, so he decided to just keep praising her. After all, their stock of ammo was limited, so they wouldn't get much practice. The most important thing was to raise her confidence.

Fana carefully lowered the handle she was gripping with both hands. The gun stand was already fixed with a stopper so that instead of revolving it was now fixed. There was no need to worry about her shooting out their own wings.

The rear seat was folded up and placed at the back of the front seat, and she was aiming the gun while slightly crouched, with her right foot forward. This was a difficult position for most male pilots because of the confined space, but with Fana's smaller body she was actually relatively comfortable.

After closing her lips and glaring at the sight, Fana pulled the trigger. The gun roared violently, and, leaving behind a small vibrating sound, spit cartridges into the air.

"Kyaaaaaaaaa!"

Again with Fana's scream, bullets ran into the blue, summer sky. This time, birds took off from outside the palm tree thicket took to the air.

"No problems, that's enough."

Fana again turned around, almost in tears, making Charles laugh.

"Really?"

"Yes. You don't really get better at aiming through practice. The only way to get better at shooting people down in aerial combat is to keep trying it, in actual combat. I just need the Lady to shoot and make a blanket of bullets."

"So I just need to shoot."

"Yes. I'll tell you when to shoot, through the voice pipe, so you just have to hold onto the handle until then. As long as the enemy planes can't just walk up to us, it's fine."

Fana nodded in understanding, but then she asked, still unsatisfied.

"If I want to shoot them down, what should I do?"

"You need them to come as close as possible. Until their plane is sticking out from the sight."

Charles pointed at it. Fana closed one eye and looked through the sight with the other. She couldn't imagine a plane sticking out of it, but she could understand that meant an extremely close distance.

"Of course, if a plane were to get that close, I'll already be going through evasive maneuvers, so I don't anticipate the Lady needing to shoot."

"Really?"

"Yes. Also, it's simple to say 'wait for them to get close,' but it's actually very difficult to do. Particularly in your first battle, you tend to freak out and start shooting even at enemies that are incredibly distant. Incidentally, I was like that, too."

"Concluding like that is a bit vexing. May I shoot one more time?"

"We're limited on ammunition, so this will have to be the last time."

"Okay."

Fana looked into the sight, imagined a Shinden close enough to stick out of it, and gripped the handle. The gun blazed, but she held back a third scream.

When they were done practicing, they had nothing else left to do, so they returned to the beach, and began preparing for the night.

Some fat, healthy-looking chickens roamed about in the palm tree thicket past the beach. Breaking up bits of bread made them to wander closer, without any fear. With a deft, practiced movement, Charles picked one up, and laughed happily at Fana.

"We've got quite a banquet tonight, my Lady."

As he said, by the time the horizon was burnt red by the sun, and the sky filled with a complex pattern of crimson and brass, a furnace rounded with stones was burning, and the chicken, cleanly skinned, was roasted.

"You can definitely become a cook. You should have quit being a pilot in wartime and become a cook." Bringing juicy meat to her mouth, a look of surprise covered her face, and a prayer of thanks to the sky, Fana turned and said that to him, with complete sincerity.

"I'll think about it if this operation succeeds," He absent-mindedly answered, with no intention behind the words. Biting at the well roasted meat, he tasted the juiciness on his tongue, and instinctively closed his eyes.

Swallowing meat that was dense enough to make his jaw ache, he whispered, more serious than before. "Maybe I'll actually think about it."

"Wonderful. Honestly, I'm not just being polite, I've never eaten such delicious cooking before."

Fana showered him with undiluted praise while holding the fox-colored meat in one hand. On top of only being able to eat fish since their departure, she was starved because she played all afternoon, so she, like Charles, turned meat into bones in a heartbeat.

"Ahh, I'm so full, I feel so wonderful."

She said, fully satisfied, and then stretched her legs out in front of her, drank water from her flask, and then placed her arms behind her, and leaned back on them, to look at the starry sky. The lukewarm wind lightly lifted her hair.

"It's a good island. Birds and fish are abundant, and the temperature and view are perfect."

"This must be what heaven is like. Everything I can see is beautiful."

"Indeed. It makes me forget about war."

"I don't want to go to the imperial prince. I wish I could stay on this island forever," She said, and then she swallowed what she was about to say next.

She'd said her true feelings, without intending to.

She glanced at Charles. He was silent, and poking at the stone furnace with a branch. He obviously heard what she'd said, but he'd decided to ignore it.

Something in her mind snapped.

How dishonest, she thought. Normally he'd listen to her every whim, facing her directly, but when it came to something like this, he didn't look at her. Along with a feeling of irritation, came determination.

If she were to say the same thing, how would Charles respond?

If she were to say her want, then maybe he would accept. And then they'd just throw every to the wind, and be with each other forever-

Her heart tightened up at the thought.

"Charles."

She said his name. The noble face turned to her. He was acting calm, but he clearly looked more strained than usual.

"Yes?"

And his response sounded more awkward.

She searched for words.

She wanted to express something to him.

Something that felt suppressed in her heart, something heartrending, something suffocating, something primal that welled up no matter how hard she tried to keep it down. A storm raged in her; a pure, but violent storm.

And she knew the words for that storm.

I want to be with Charles forever.

The imperial prince Carlo, House del Moral, the future as an empress, she didn't want to have anything to do with any of those, as long as she could keep flying, with her back to Charles, on the Santa Cruz-

She couldn't resist her feelings. She opened her mouth, intending to throw them at Charles, as words.

But Charles betrayed that determination, pre-emptively shutting her thoughts down.

"Was it not enough? Would you like another one? I feel like I could eat some more, so I could go catch another one, if you'd like."

Fana, jaw agape, stared at Charles' hardened face, and realized she'd been parried.

The next moment, something inside Fana was ripped apart. And from that hole rose another feeling that formulated in her throat, and came out as words.

"Eat by yourself. Eat as much as you'd like. I don't need any."

"No, I'm fine, too. I just thought, maybe the Lady would like to eat more."

"We split a whole chicken between us! Of course I'm stuffed. Do I look like someone that just eats and eats and eats?"

"Ummm, no my Lady, I apologize for my poor guess. Please forgive me."

"What do you mean, forgive? I'm not angry. I don't care what you do. Your job is to bring me to the imperial prince, and yet you killed a day by drinking all night. There's nothing to say to such a person, you know?"

"Yes, umm, all I can do is apologize about that, because there really is nothing more I can say."

Fana's voice was becoming teary. Every now and then, she sniffled as she kept berating Charles.

"What a strange person. How stupid. The imperial prince is so much better than you. He's handsome, his father is the king, and... he's handsome."

"Yes, umm, of course. Or rather, I think it's a bit, uh, insane, to even try to compare us."

"Insane? Insane??"

"Yes, err, my Lady, please calm down."

"I am calm. You're the one that's insane. Because, I'm quite normal."

"Yes, um, well of course."

Fana, on the verge of tears despite being irritated, started grabbing random chicken bones from around her and threw them at Charles. And then she grabbed the bottle of brandy next to her, took off the cap, and gulped.

"M-my Lady."

Charles couldn't act fast enough to stop her. It was a magnificent trumpet-drinking, like that which was seen in the slums of Rio de Este, in the Amadora region. She gulped down the amber liquid, making quite a sound with every gulp, and then slammed the bottle down on the sand with one hand.

"*Urp.*"

The future empress of Levahm burped. He'd heard Fana's father, the late Duke Diego was quite a heavy drinker, and it seemed Fana had inherited that lineage.

Her two eyes, burning with anger, stabbed through the cowering Charles.

"What. Am I not supposed to drink? You drank until you were all wobbly, too."

"Yes, but, umm."

"You, drink, too, stupid."

"No, I shouldn't-"

"If you won't, I will."

Like she was simply drinking soda, she once again began gulping down brandy. She looked like a random outcast.

"Please, stop. If you keep drinking it'll be a detriment to tomorrow's flight."

"Shut up, stupid. What do I care. I'm not going to listen to cowards."

"What did I do that was cowardly?"

"Everything. Two days ago you called me Fana, and said social class doesn't matter, and then overnight you started acting apathetic. 'Lady! Lady!' Seriously, what? I bet deep down, you're still calling me Fana, anyways!"

"Well, that's-"

"I thought so! How exasperating! Then just call me that. I'm giving you permission, so call me that, go on!"

"I can't."

Upon hearing his answer, Fana lifted her head, and resumed trumpet-drinking.

"M-my Lady!"

"Urp."

"Give me the bottle, now, it's getting dangerous."

"I'll give it to you if you call me Fana."

She glared at Charles with wet, unfocused eyes. Charles understood that what stood in front of him was just a bad drunk.

"The bottle."

"Nfufu. No."

"Without saying the impossible."

"If you want it, come get it."

She wobbled as she stood up, then began humming and skipping around the fire, as if making fun of Charles.

This was certainly quite a sight, one that couldn't be shown to the imperial prince Carlo. If a newspaper reporter were here, they'd be doing backflips as they flashed their camera. Charles pushed a hand against the side of his head as he grinded his teeth. He cursed Captain Domingo for giving him such a strong bottle of alcohol. Because if it, the wheels were beginning to spin off.

"Stupid, stupid, Charles is stupid."

She showered him with taunts and barbs, and in between she kept drinking more brandy. At this rate, she'd end up drinking as much as he did last night.

Charles stood up, and, as if having to deal with a carnivorous beast, slowly inched toward Fana.

She, on the other hand, stared at him in a creepy, weirdly beautiful way. Holding the bottle behind her, she egged him on with a mischievous smile, and slowly inched backwards, keeping her distance with Charles. To her back was the ocean.

"Stop messing around."

"I never mess around. I'm always serious."

The waves curled around her feet as she continued backing up.

"You'll drown if you enter the ocean while drunk."

But, not listening, she looked up at the night sky. The sharp moonlight covered Fana's silhouette with bronze.

"The moon is beautiful. Hey, lets dance, Charles."

"Unfortunately I don't know how."

"If you dance with me, I'll give you back the brandy."

"Please keep your willfulness in check."

"Charles is the only one who'll listen to me. Please, let me stay selfish. When I go to Esmeralda, I have to go back a life of being kept under watch. I haven't even done anything wrong, but I have to become a prisoner again."

"My Lady."

"Everyone around me just keeps watch over everything. When I eat, when I take a walk in the garden, when I read. Every night, every night, tutors grade my day on a scale of ten. And I have to fix everything they don't like.

"Wouldn't you rather be a prisoner? At least they have people being punished with them, don't they? I don't have any friends that'll live under constant scrutiny, like me. I'm just being watched, alone, forever. Even though I didn't do anything wrong.

"That's why I made a wall, and lived on the other side of it. That way, as long as I do what I'm told, I'm fine. I don't have to care. And I was supposed to live there forever. But…but because of Charles, look at me, look at what you made me do, and still… and still-"

"My Lady..."

"Please, dance, Charles."

The mischievous smile of just a moment ago vanished, replaced by a teary, child-like, pouting Fana.

Gauging their distance, Charles leaped through the waves, and closed in on Fana at once. He tried to grab the bottle held behind her, but she evaded the hand by squirming, which led to her losing her balance and falling into the waves.

The bottle fell from Fana's hand, and the amber liquid poured out onto the wet sand.

The waves returned, washing over Fana and Charles.

Fana was lying on her back, staring straight up at Charles. Beyond his shoulder were countless stars.

Charles held himself up from the sand with his left arm, and his right hand was holding her left wrist. The blue waves reflecting the moonlight played with her hair.

They were frozen in place.

Without saying anything, they stared in each others' eyes.

They both knew their eyes held the same feelings. Deep down in them, they called for each other.

They could barely smell the scent of salt. The waves crawled back, sliding silently across the sand, and another set of waves crashed toward them.

"I'm going to stand." Suppressing the heart beat echoing through him, Charles coldly stated, after a moment.

Fana silently watched, her back still submerged.

He forcibly grabbed her hand and pulled her up. Lukewarm wind blew from the coast, caressing her soaked hair.

Still standing at the beach, Fana began crying. Scrunching her face, that which was compared to losing one's way in the absolute light, she sobbed, shoulders rising and falling violently.

"Charles won't dance."

"I said, I can't dance. I'm not the son of a distinguished family."

"What a horrible person. I'm begging you so much, but you won't dance."

Fana's reasoning wasn't working, and she wasn't listening to him anymore. Her eyes were soaked, and she rained blows on him with her clenched fists. She was really bad with alcohol.

Whilst being pelted, he grabbed her hand and dragged her to the dunes. He sat her down by the furnace, and had her warm up.

Fana kept crying. And he silently sat by her side.

The night of paradise passed thus. Until Fana grew tired from crying and went to sleep, Charles watched over the fire.

She slept, curled up like a baby on her right side. Poking through the stones with a branch, Charles felt restless.

If he let down his guard, a fierce pain would stab through him. And from the other side of the pain, whispered a demon.

Run with Fana. She desires it, too. Run away, together, to the end of the world.

But he screwed his eyes shut and shook the seductive thoughts from his brain.

"As long as we get through tomorrow, everything will end," He told himself. After 3,000 kilometers of flight, the road ended at Cyon island, tomorrow. After that, they just needed to contact La Pista airbase on Cyon island, and wait for an airship from the continent to arrive. Then he'd part with Fana.

And in order to say farewell in the morning, they'd have to break through the blockade.

"I'll bring her to the imperial prince."

Once more, he repeated the vow to himself, the same vow he'd repeated so many times on this trip.

Chapter 9

"I don't remember what happened yesterday," Fana said in a grudging tone. She stood on sand dunes covered with the morning mist, a flush on her face. "Really, I don't remember anything."

But he could tell from her expression that she clearly remembered everything. Holding back his desire to tease, Charles answered with a nonchalant expression.

"I forgot what I spoke to the Lady about, too, whilst we were being chased, so this makes us even."

She glared at Charles, vexed, and turned away.

Charles moved his arms and legs after standing up, doing a light warm-up exercise.

Because he'd rested a whole day, he was in close to perfect condition. Even the wound on his temple didn't hurt that much anymore.

He looked at the western sky that was becoming brass. Countless clouds that had been drawn out with invisible ink in the clear, biting morning air filled the sky. Cloud density around seven or eight. It was perfect for taking flight.

"There are good clouds. Let's take off," He said to Fana, who was still sitting on the dune.

A slight color of protest appeared in her eyes, reflecting the morning sky.

"We can't stay on this island forever. The enemy may begin to land, to try to find us. We must fly, to survive."

"I know."

Fana's response wasn't very enthusiastic. It was obvious she wanted to stay on this island more. But he couldn't acquiesce.

After waking himself up more with some more light exercise, with Fana in tow he returned to the plains where the Santa Cruz was hidden.

Maintenance had gone well, and the metal hydride stack was in good condition. When he powered the plane, it made a healthy sound as it began to vibrate, and the propeller smoothly began to spin.

After making sure Fana was seated, he closed the windshield.

Beyond the backup windshield, which they'd installed after getting on the island, was a blue sky that seemed right out of oil painting.

"It was a good island."

"Indeed."

"It's a shame we must leave it, but it's time to go. To our last flight."

"... Indeed."

After a short conversation over the voice pipe, he turned up the throttle and pushed the control stick forward. As the plane dashed forward, air pressure gathered under the wings.

Ultramarine-colored wings reflected the sunlight, and the Santa Cruz ran into the sky. The propeller's groan was clean, and the comfortable plus-G reverberated over his stomach. Paradise grew smaller in Fana's sight. The transparent mountain cuffs around the island left her vision, and eventually, the dark-green island melted into the ultramarine expanse. Fana stared distantly toward the expanse, where the island should be, filled with parting regret.

The nose of the plane was pointed towards the La Pista airbase on the imperial island of Cyon. Charles climbed 3,000 meters before making the plane parallel to the horizon.

Working hard to slap himself out of the relaxed life of the uninhabited island, he focused on the airspace in front of him. He couldn't see anything like a patrol plane. He confidently skipped from one cloud to another, flying covertly. And because he was too confident that he could escape with this much cloud…he misjudged.

It was an hour after taking flight that his instincts as a pilot sniffed out the strangeness of the situation.

He glanced in every direction from behind his flight goggles. He was piercing through the smatterings of clouds, looking into the skies beyond. Around him, torn-up-looking clouds were everywhere, becoming stratus clouds at altitudes 4,000 and 2,000 meters. And he silently flew through the world between those layers. The indigo-blue-colored clouds stood out more than the blue sky. And the torn clouds covering the horizon made it difficult to see. They obstructed his attempts to look at the sky, so it was difficult to keep watch.

He couldn't see anything … but they were there. His spine told him so.

He could smell something like steel. He could smell several steel clumps in this airspace.

The enemy already knew where the Santa Cruz was.

It was the same feeling as when he'd flown right into a fleet. The radar the enemy carrier carried must have been really good. They'd already found him, before he could find them, and they were getting in position to pounce. And Charles' experience and instincts alerted him to that before he could see them.

He'd underestimated them.

He thought he could get away if he kept watch. But if the enemy had perfected a very good radar, things would change. The naked eye would be obstructed by clouds, but radars wouldn't. Even if he were to fly into a cloud, the pulse fired from the radar would find the Santa Cruz anyways, bounce back, and tell them exactly where he was. If the superiority of their planes wasn't all – if the Amatsukami had vastly superior radars, too – then this war would only end in misery for the Empire.

"Enemy planes behind, to the left."

Fana's tense voice came across the voice pipe. When he looked in that direction, he saw in the distance the narrow, potato-bug-shaped ship. The enemy ship was flying on the same plane as the Santa Cruz, on the other side of the cloud. It was almost certainly the San'un type high-speed destroyer he'd run into at the Great Fall. The signal light that was flickering near the bridge was probably communicating with ships in the area. But because he was surrounded by clouds, he wasn't able to see exactly what was around him.

Decisions made in flight led directly to life or death. Aerial combat was like a constant chain of life-or-death decisions. There was no one you could discuss things

with, and you had to make one choice out of hundreds, and depend on it with your life.

This time, Charles' decision was to fly higher in order to better see the enemy's numbers and positioning.

After hitting the throttle once and gaining the necessary speed, he pulled the control stick toward him. Along with a low groan from the propeller, the Santa Cruz pierced through the clouds as it ascended.

"To the right and below, two more enemy planes."

Fana's nervous voice reached him. As he ascended, he looked down behind him, and saw the other two San'un-class destroyers. Like the other one, they were flying on the same plane as the Santa Cruz. They'd already caught sight of him, and were flying after him.

They were pretty fast for their size. The Santa Cruz was just a bit faster, but it'd take around five or six minutes to completely lose them.

It takes your ears, eyes, every limb, all five senses, even a sixth sense, to control a plane with your body and mind while evading gunfire. That made five or six minutes basically the same as five or six hours to a pilot.

He cut across the air diagonally, and pierced through the clouds hovering at 4,000 meters' altitude. It was a pure, blue sky with nothing in view. The last time, the aircraft carrier was floating above them, but this time there was not one ship at an altitude higher than the Santa Cruz.

After climbing to about 8,000 meters altitude, he straightened the plane. At the same time, Fana's voice trembled over the voice pipe, almost in a scream.

"From the cloud under us... ten! They're coming!"

Tensing his limbs, he stretched his neck and looked down.

The ocean of whiteness was spraying mist as two columns of San'un destroyers, ten in total, ascended through the cloud. He could feel the air shaking.

"There are more."

Charles' eyes widened in surprise. There were a total of eight San'un before. Minus the one he brought down, there should have been seven. They must have been received reinforcements while they were resting on the island.

The blanket of clouds under the heavy steel clumps were hit by waves from the lifting devices, were ripped apart, and swirled like the ocean during a storm, and spraying mist surrounded the destroyers. The airspace was already beginning to look like a battlefield.

Charles looked even closer.

On the broadside of the ships, surrounded by whiteness, the tens of pentagon-shaped fortresses and the hundreds of cannons contained in them were pointed at the Santa Cruz. Firing preparations were completed, and he could imagine the gunners licking their lips with anticipation.

They were formed in two columns, on either side of the Santa Cruz, and were flying about five kilometers parallel to each other. They were probably setting up the bullets to explode at a good range.

It'd be no use running toward the ocean surface. He had to either speed away from them, or run perpendicular to them. The maximum altitude of the Santa Cruz was 7,500 meters; at that point his top speed would begin to fall, and that would mean being plunked from behind by anti-air fire.

What now? He asked himself.

Fly straight forward, avoid fire, and see what the enemy does.

He decided.

As he'd seen in the previous exchange, the Amatsukami air fleet favored using tight formations to raise the likelihood of taking down their target. Even on the Levahm side, the days of relying on bravado, skill, and mental fortitude was beginning to fade into a thing of the past, but they were still not even close to being as modern in combat as the Amatsukami.

What was going to start wasn't a chivalrous fight of wills, but an escape from a mechanical strategy to eliminate Charles from the sky. Two, three steps were nothing; he'd have to think five, six steps ahead to avoid being trapped.

He wasn't going to be shot down here, not after coming this far. He'd get through this, all ten-some minutes, using everything he'd accumulated.

And the moment he braced himself, feeling the air under him rumbling.

He looked down; the upper hull of the destroyer right under him was covered in red. The shots fired exploded into fireworks around him. The silver wings coasted amidst the blazing heat, as the Santa Cruz lowered its nose and sped up in a descent.

He'd have to get out of this with pure speed. He hit the throttle. Plus-G lurched into him. Bullets were in pursuit. He thought Fana would scream, but he didn't hear her voice. She was probably holding herself together, screwing her eyes shut.

Snaking left and right, forcing the gunners' aim off, he focused every nerve in his body on evading shots. Shreds of metal from the explosive bullets rattled against the silvery surface of the plane. He prayed the metal hydride stack wouldn't get hit.

The hand gripping the control stick sweated profusely. He wanted to get away from this. Death was right there within reach; he wanted to be away from this fear. He subconsciously hit the throttle again. With a heavy groan, the Santa Cruz continued to descend, while speeding up.

The ten San'un kept up speeding, but rose in altitude. The front guns glittered, and red bullet traces lined the sky, pursuing them.

The world beyond the windshield was filled with flames. They could feel the heat. But he didn't even have the time to wipe away sweat.

After passing through the ashen world and descending to around the same altitude as the destroyers, the blanket of cloud underneath broke up again.

!?

Charles' eyes widened. Like a rising cumulonimbus cloud, the blanket cloud under him rose in a dome shape, like a small mountain. It wasn't just one; like a mountain range on the cloud, a whole line of clouds rose. And from the other side of the windshield came the rumbling and pressure of several lifting devices.

"Heavy cruiser!"

The top of the dome appeared as he shouted. Spraying into the air, four proud

Amatsukami heavy cruisers ascended with a malevolent groan.

Drops of water covered the surface of the bug-shaped ship, and its black exterior gleamed in the sunlight. They were each roughly 150 meters in length, four heavy ships lined in a crisp single-line formation.

Charles ground his teeth as he took stock of his surroundings.

The destroyers had been in a two-column formation to chase him here.

As if spreading out both arms to embrace him, the heavy cruisers were pointed at the Santa Cruz. And their armaments were incomparable to the destroyers giving chase from behind. Their guns were set up in a T-formation, and now they were in the most perfect of positions to fire. If he were to keep flying forward, they'd simply turn to dust in moments.

The fronts of all four cruisers turned crimson, and the heavens shook from the cannons.

Instinctively, Charles wanted to push his control stick forward and dive toward the cloud.

However.

Don't go down!

His intuition screamed.

An instantaneous reaction kept his and Fana's lives intact.

In the blink of an eye, Charles pulled the control stick he was about to push toward himself, and kicked the right footbar.

The wings and centrifugal force reacted to the control, and the Santa Cruz rolled to the side, like a kite whose string just snapped.

The shells from the heavy cruisers exploded, pursuing the Santa Cruz. But the plane was sliding sideways and losing altitude as it rolled, so it was impossible for the enemy to anticipate his movements.

Charles didn't pause rolling. The world spun around them. Their visibility was obscured by flame and smoke. Most pilots would no doubt succumb to the loss of

location, but Charles' natural talent allowed him to hold onto the invisible horizon.

Glaring at a single point ahead of him, he focused, and he gradually stabilized the plane from a drilling motion.

Charles' trained semicircular canals hardly felt the effect of the rolling. The world stopped instantly, and he was back to normal. The rear seat was quiet. Most new pilots would be initiated by a veteran in aerial rolling, and they would lose consciousness, so Charles assumed Fana did, too. And he thought was good. She was buckled into the seat with the seat belt, so she wouldn't be thrown out of the plane. So paying the rear seat no mind, he glanced around him.

He'd evaded one salvo from the forward heavy cruisers, but the destroyers were still gaining ground from behind. If he'd escaped toward the cloud, he'd have to flown right into the hail of shells, no doubt resulting in an explosion.

But he couldn't relax now. The second salvo was coming.

All I can do is keep dodging.

Crawling under the cloud was the last of his options. The enemy would anticipate him wanting to go under, after all, and would be prepared. He couldn't just follow the book.

Quickly speeding up the plane, Charles flew in the opposite direction of the heavy cruisers' vector, whilst snaking.

He wanted to fly toward the rear of the four heavy cruisers flying to cut him off, and try to evade the shells fired from the underbelly. He concentrated, carefully but almost flamboyantly flying just over the top of the clouds.

The clouds were mashed up by shots. The San'un silhouettes looked farther away than before. Their top-speed difference was beginning to show, and they were beginning to break off. The heavy cruisers couldn't keep up with the deft movements of the Santa Cruz either, as they were just now beginning to turn.

I can get past them!

But the moment he saw hope, they were just as quickly dashed.

The king of the sky – Shinden.

Like the heavy cruisers, they appeared in front of the Santa Cruz, having come through the cloud below. A total of seven. Going head-to-head. They were probably waiting for Charles below, but got impatient, and took initiative.

"Seven planes from behind."

Charles was taken aback at hearing Fana's slightly raspy voice through the voice pipe. He was surprised she managed to avoid losing consciousness from the Santa Cruz' abrupt movements. Her voice was also slightly tensed, by she was staying calm during this harsh firefight. She was more level-headed than he'd expected.

He looked behind and saw the seven new planes, as Fana had said. Combined with the seven in front, there were fourteen. He prayed they weren't, like the other day, that good. If that were the case, he could be at least somewhat confident he'd be able to get away.

As several propellers made heavy rumbling sounds, the wings of the Shinden in front turned red, and red lines streaked toward them.

At last, Charles pushed the control stick forward.

The Santa Cruz plunged smoothly into the cloud below.

The windshield was immediately covered an ashen color, and at the altitude of around 7,500 meters, he cleared through the cloud.

Sunlight was screened by the cloud, and the sky below was dreary. And even darker-gray colored clouds were below, making visibility poor. Even if it wasn't raining, this wasn't an ideal situation for pursuit.

"Fourteen planes descending from above."

Fana's calm voice came across. Charles didn't look in the given direction, and hit the throttle. He knew the accuracy of Fana's reporting. There was no point in painstakingly confirming each and every one now. He'd come to trust her eyes as his own, so he simply opted to control the plane.

The formation of Shinden followed from behind. He could feel them on his back. Their killing intent filled the sky and passed through the windshield, soaking into his soul.

The first shots were fired.

He kicked the left footbar to evade. The Shinden that fired flew past the Santa Cruz, and kept flying straight forward.

...?

It was different this time. Maybe the squad leader changed. He felt uneasy as the next Shinden tried to line up a shot and fired.

At this point, there was nothing left but to keep repeating the same evasive maneuver every time they tried to line up a shot. He kicked the footbar again to slide the plane away from the shots. And the streaks of red passed by the Santa Cruz and pelted through the dark clouds.

And again, this Shinden flew past the Santa Cruz, and flew straight ahead.

Something was wrong. He peered into the dark sky ahead.

The first Shinden had done a quick turn and was heading toward him. The second Shinden followed suit.

Enemy planes in front and in the rear. Charles realized what they were after.

"That's not good."

The fourteen Shinden were going to abuse their superior speed, to create a circle around the Santa Cruz, attacking from every angle.

They weren't going to screw things up like before, where the squad leaders fought with each other to try to grab glory for themselves. This time they were extraordinarily coordinated and reasonable.

His plane was already inferior, and now he was going to be subjected to a coordinated attack. Hope was dwindling.

And as if to crush the dwindling hope, the Shinden from behind broke formation and began attacking the Santa Cruz individually, firing as they passed by.

Charles continued to perform evasive maneuvers every time anyone got on an even plane with him. He pondered asking Fana to man the rear gun, but he decided against

it. If she were to grip the gun, the enemy pilots would begin to aim at her, too. And he didn't want that to happen.

I can't change my strategy now.

He was determined.

All he would do now was to kick the footbar anytime someone lined up a shot at him. The simplicity made him uneasy, but there was nothing else to be done. So many of his comrades had been shot out of the sky because they tried to do something else. Charles understood that the best way to survive in the sky was to hone your fundamentals.

The Shinden attack was relentless. 20mm guns blazed one after another as the enemy made passes.

He would simply time his footbar kicks with the enemy's passes. And every time he'd kick the left footbar, he'd slide left. The enemy would then fly past Charles, make a big turn, fly at him, and then return to the big circle of planes. And when the thirteen planes in front made their pass, it would be his turn again. There was no end to the loop. The only thing Charles could do was keep sliding the plane.

It was like an ant hole without an exit. No matter how much he struggled, there was no light at the end of the tunnel. If they kept firing at him like this, eventually … a feeling of despair slowly crept up on him.

This was a battle of wills.

This was hard on the enemy, too. It took great effort for fourteen planes to continue flying in coordinated formation. So he would continue to focus on the planes behind him, avoiding direct hits whilst limiting the damage done to the Santa Cruz.

The longer the show went on, the more the enemy pilots would begin to fret. They'd fear flying out of radio distance of the carrier. The longer he held out, the more anxious they'd become, and the only way to survive was to hold out until they gave up. And to do that, he had to keep dodging every single shot. He was pouring every bit of stamina, will, and sensory strength into dodging, with his proud skill.

The hand gripping the control stick began to tremble, because he was growing tired. His nerves, stretched to their limits, began fraying. But the moment he let down his guard, he'd be taken out. He reminded himself that Fana was seated behind him, now, and he berated himself for wanting to stop.

Don't ever give up.

Tracers flew past him, the color of magma. He would just keep flying straight, sliding left and right, avoiding shots. This was all he needed to do. He musn't try to do anything else.

That was one of the most courageous decision for a pilot. Most pilots, stuck in the middle of so many planes relentlessly attacking him, would become aggravated at the repetition of the simple task, try to do something that wasn't fundamental, and instead fall prey to the enemy's trap and get shot. But Charles was so good at the fundamentals that he could hold out in such a hopeless situation.

He dodged. And kept dodging. Over and over again; that was all he thought about, paying careful attention to each and every movement, and staying calm, flew around thousands of bullets, deftly flew like a sparrow.

Even if there were fourteen enemies, they wouldn't be able to hit him unless they lined up perfectly. And they could only attack one at a time, so as long as he gave proper respective to each one, over and over again, he'd eventually see the light at the end of the tunnel. Telling himself this, Charles did his best to keep plugging away.

The Shinden pilots in turn were vexed by Charles' skill.

The Amatsukami pilots knew, because of the radio telegraph code, that the empress-to-be of the Levahm Empire was seated in the rear seat of the Santa Cruz. It was obvious to everyone that shooting down the enemy's light of hope in the middle of the ocean would lead to a promotion and endless glory, so they secretly gave chase. However, the enemy pilot was unbelievably good. It took a tremendous amount of skill to continue evading attacks whilst being surrounded by so many enemy planes.

All of the Shinden pilots knew they wouldn't be able to replicate such a feat – except for one.

And the formation leader was excited at meeting someone of equal skill. He didn't think someone this good was part of the Levahm Empire. It wasn't out of the question to believe he was the top pilot of the Levahm Empire, considering he was entrusted with the empress' life.

His heart began racing. He wanted to shoot this pilot down. This childish feeling made his neck crooked, like a preying mantis. He wanted to take this pilot on, one on one, using the fullest of his skills, instead of being restricted by the tight formation.

Once upon a time, there were proud warriors in the Amatsukami, called "samurai." There was still a bit of that blood in this formation leader. He wasn't interested in accolades or promotions. He lived to fight people of great skill. As long as he was able to partake in a "do or die" combat, he didn't care about anything else. And as long as he was able to shoot down Fana del Moral, any selfish action would be overlooked. The result, not the method, was what was important.

First lieutenant and formation leader, pilot Chijiwa, made such excuses to himself as he gave the rest of the formation an order over the radio.

"I'll do this alone; everyone else stand back."

"…Huh?"

Feeling the killing intent dissipate in the sky, Charles looked behind.

"The enemies…are backing off."

Fana spoke directly to the front seat. As she said, the circle of Shinden began to back off, and gradually completely dissipated. The rain of tracer shots stopped just like that, and only the Santa Cruz' propeller could be heard.

"Did they give up?"

"No, just one plane is left. The rest ascended."

Charles glanced around behind him. As Fana said, one plane, seemingly the formation leader, maintained altitude, while the other thirteen backed out of the airspace and, like confirmation planes, simply watched.

The plane in pursuit sped up.

Feeling nervous, Charles held his foot over the footbar, but the enemy plane, instead of lining up, closed in from the left side, and began flying at his side.

The single-seat Shinden, not equipped with a revolving turret, couldn't fire at him. And because the Santa Cruz' rear gun was fixed, they were both safe from each other.

Charles glared at the plane from the side of his eye.

And when he realized that at the side of the nose was an mocking illustration of a beagle, he felt goosebumps all over him.

"That-"

He hadn't forgotten – the pilot flying next to him now was the opponent who downed Charles for the first time in his life. The guy that stared at him, savoring victory as he circled around the parachuting Charles.

He wouldn't lose the next time they met, Charles had sworn. After that, he'd searched for the beagle every time he flew into combat. He didn't care if he was stepped on and mocked on the ground, but he didn't want to lose in the air. He would put his pride on the line to defeat the beagle – he'd vowed.

But to appear now of all times!

Begrudgingly, he glared into the enemy cockpit.

And there, the pilot slid back his windshield, and looked coolly back at him.

It was a very feminine face, but the sharp jaw and sunken expression proved he was a man. The sky-blue muffler flowed with the wind, and with a challenging smirk, he stared at Charles, with eyes that seemed to pierce everything that existed in this airspace.

There as no mistake about it. It was the opponent he'd been looking for.

Charles glared back. And then he smirked, challenging the opponent.

Can you actually take me down?

He forced that feeling into his eyes, and hammered the emotion into the enemy. The confident enemy, in turn, accepted the look. Fana sounded worried.

"What's this...?"

"He's looking for a duel. It's an Amatsukami duel ritual."

"Like a samurai."

"It's also the best way to take us down. One really good pilot is better than fourteen

bad pilots."

"Is that so?"

"Unfortunately, that is so."

That beagle was good. On a good day, they were around even in skill. He didn't want to think about a bad day, because that might chip away at his mental state.

The true strength of the Shinden, as pulled out by an elite pilot – Charles knew in his soul the dark prospects brought on by that.

He picked up the voice pipe.

This would be the last test.

This might be where everything ends…so he wanted to talk to Fana one more time.

"This is it, Lady. The enemy is incredibly strong, but let's get through this together."

"Yes. Together." Fana quietly answered Charles' resolute voice.

The word 'together' settled warmly into her heart.

Survive together, or die together.

No matter which way things went, she'd quietly accept it. It was a natural, and comfortable, feeling.

After closing his windshield and losing some speed, the enemy pilot settled behind and above the Santa Cruz.

The fight was on.

Charles breathed deeply, and gripped the control stick.

And then he suddenly pushed the stick forward. The silver wing turned amidst the thin-ink-colored sky, and the Santa Cruz plunged into a thick mess of cloud.

The beagle-plane followed suit, without any trouble. Along with the heavy groaning of its rear propellers, the snake-like jet-black plane cut through the dark-gray cloud and flung puffs of cloud into the sky behind it.

Charles could feel the enemy behind him. He couldn't see, but the beagle was keeping up with him. He knew as much.

It was a thicker cloud than he'd expected. He stared at the altitude meter as they made a nosedive. Altitude 2,500 meters. And they still weren't through the cloud. The windshield was covered in such a thick cloud that he couldn't even see his own wings. The enemy shouldn't be able to see him in such density, either.

He pulled the stick toward him and righted the plane.

Mid-cloud flight was Charles' specialty. Even though normal pilots lost track of their location, Charles was born with the ability to hang on to the horizon, no matter what happened.

Santa Cruz cut through the gray darkness.

Raindrops slid along the windshield. Only the sound of the propeller echoed through the dark world. He couldn't see anything, except for the horizon that was engraved into his mind. And he flew toward that horizon.

This cloud was thicker than he thought, and expansive. It was great for losing opponents. Even if Charles was the chaser, he wouldn't be able to keep track of the enemy.

I've lost him, he thought, as he punched out of the cloud.

The beautiful ocean suddenly appeared under them.

His eyes, so used to the darkness, were stunned for a moment.

The airspace past the cloud was absolutely empty, a world of cloud-density zero.

Far below him was the calm ocean that looked like a scattering of silver leaves. It was like waves were frozen in place, like a model landscape. From the aquamarine ocean, to the sky slightly thinner in color than the ocean, the harsh sunlight from the southern peak rained on everything. And that sunlight was reflected directly off of the surface.

And Charles realized. That amidst this landscape of fortune and bounty, was a malevolent sound of a propeller. He wanted to act like he didn't hear it, but the voice pipe sounded.

"Left and up, to the back, the enemy is in pursuit."

Holding back his urge to shout, ‘That's impossible!’ he turned to where Fana had directed him.

The first thing that his eyes met was the fierce sunlight. He quickly darted his eyes a bit to the side, and saw the jet-black snake-like plane nestled into the sun from the side of his eye.

The beagle, as if in a sightseeing flight, had settled in with the sun at his back, chasing him textbook-style.

Never mind losing his way in the clouds after such a long flight, he'd actually even managed to keep hold of the Santa Cruz' position.

"Oh, crap," he mumbled. He was on inferior footing in airspace with nowhere to hide, and plane inferiority aside, even the piloting skill was inferior – that would only lead to one thing.

"He's coming!!"

Along with Fana's voice, the Shinden's propeller sound changed. Slicing diagonally through the air, the beagle attacked from above. The maneuver of swooping in from a higher altitude mimicked that of an eagle swooping after its prey.

Charles quickly kicked the footbar, slanted the control stick, and evaded the charging plane.

Bullets would come raining down as they grazed past each other – is what he'd braced himself for, but the enemy didn't fire a single shot. After sliding past just an arm's reach apart, the beagle turned around about 600 meters under him.

It was like this before, too, when he'd been shot down. Until he was securely in firing range, he didn't waste a single shot. Like an "iai" swordsman, he brought his plane as close to firing range as possible, and only when he was certain of landing shots would he fire with his 20mm guns.

This was too dangerous an enemy.

Charles at the moment only had three ways to win: wait for the enemy to run out of fuel, run out of ammo, or be overcome by fear of crashing and give up.

He would obviously have to give up on hoping the enemy would run out of ammo. He would have to look at this as, if the enemy fired, he'd be shot down. They probably had a similar amount of fuel, so the only thing he could do was pray the enemy would give up.

But would this enemy turn his tail just by being pulled along a bit?

Wouldn't someone so skilled that he could chase an enemy straight through a cloud be experienced in ocean flight?

Someone experienced in ocean flight wouldn't panic over flying out of radio range. They'd simply keep chasing, without worry. So how was he supposed to win?

Charles realized he was inching closer to utter despair. And realizing that, he desperately tried to focus. This wasn't the time to be feeling anxious.

After all, as he was thinking, the Shinden's propeller groaned. It was rising in the air. The black light, with its silent guns, felt even creepier than before.

Where would he run? It was time for Charles to decide, again. And he mustn't mess up that decision. The future of Levahm was seated behind him. Each and every move would change the face of the central ocean war.

If he tried to evade sideways, it'd become close-ranged combat. If that happened, the Santa Cruz, with inferior turning speed, would instantly be riddled with 20mm bullets and dropped into the ocean. The Shinden's forte was in close-ranged combat, so he couldn't let that happen.

He could only go vertically. And that didn't mean a calm descent, but rather a nosedive at top speed, to shake the Shinden.

There was just one thing he'd never tried against a Shinden. Maybe, just maybe, it would work. He wasn't left with much else.

Current altitude, 4,300. He might be able to do it. No, he'd have to.

In the time it'd take for the fireworks from a flint striking stone to vanish, his instincts as a pilot made him jar his plane downward.

The Shinden stabbed upward, at his underbelly. At that instant, the Santa Cruz did a half-spin and began flying straight down.

Like a panther, the Shinden also turned, and began chasing him down.

Charles didn't turn to look behind him. Only the stopped ocean was in the view across the windshield. Toward the blue of the lulling ocean, while feeling incredible plus-G, he screeched downward.

The altitude meter plummeted. The wings began to show wrinkles. Air pressure gathered against the plane, but he forced the control stick in place to prevent the plane from hopping.

As he fell, his speed rose. He forced the plane to the limits of its durability.

What he hadn't tested against a Shinden – matching their respective structural builds.

A Shinden's strength lay in its speed and maneuverability, and its incredible flight distance.

Currently the Shinden was faster, could turn better, and fly further than any other plane. But he couldn't imagine there being that big of a difference in their metal hydride stack technology. If the base engine was the same, then what would cause the plane to be that much superior? Something important must have been sacrificed.

So what would have been sacrificed? What did the Shinden sacrifice for its superiority?

The hull, in other words. The armor plating was the most likely sacrifice.

If it had gained superiority by sacrificing the safety of the pilot to maximize the power output of the plane, then it would explain much. What if the Shinden were actually structurally weak?

That was Charles' reasoning. And if he were right, the Shinden wouldn't be able to keep up with him on such a drastic descent. The plane, designed for close-ranged combat, would fall apart against the massive air pressure, and crumble into the sea.

Altitude 3,000, 2,500, 2,000.

Still getting faster, he dove over 2,000 meters. Fana had probably lost consciousness this time. He glanced at the wings from the side, and noticed there were wrinkles forming from the front to the rear, as if they would tear away any second.

If he were to keep descending, the Santa Cruz would fall apart. The instant he came to that conclusion, he flashed a look behind him.

"!!"

The Shinden was right behind him.

After about a 2,000 meter dive, the Shinden was calmly diving after the Santa Cruz.

"I can't win this!!" He shouted. The Shinden was as structurally sound as the Santa Cruz, if not more so. He couldn't even begin to fathom how that plane got its power.

He had less piloting skill, his plane was inferior both in flight and structure, and in his back seat was Fana, who was inexperienced in aerial combat.

He couldn't win. There was no way he could win.

He came close to being crushed by despair. But he hadn't been shot down yet. He hadn't lost yet; he was still miraculously flying.

So, he couldn't give up, until the end.

He kept willing himself forward, as he lifted his nose.

He needed to get away from the beagle, no matter what. He couldn't think of anything beyond that.

And to do that – he'd have to try his last resort!

Charles pulled out every bit of courage he had in him. He'd have to bet on a dangerous risk again. But at this point, testing his limits was the only thing left to do.

This enemy was strong. He was superior in every facet. He would acknowledge that much. But he couldn't afford to lose. With Fana sitting behind him, he couldn't just roll over and give up!

He hit the throttle, and began a somersault. He prayed the enemy would bite, and looked behind him.

The beagle followed. Flight just a bit off-center from the Santa Cruz, he also began doing a somersault, without suspecting anything.

Finally!

He'd avoided all sorts of tricks, but he finally bit on this trap. Charles could finally take the initiative.

What Charles challenged him to do was the S-class Levahm Empire piloting trick, the "Ishmael Turn", considered the most difficult maneuver regardless of whether you were from the east or west of the ocean.

Chijiwa, piloting the Shinden, tilted his control stick with nary a twitch. Not knowing nor caring whether his Shinden could keep up with the 2,000 meter dive of the Santa Cruz in front of him, he now saw the Santa Cruz begin a somersault.

Of course Chijiwa followed suit. His enemy was quick, brave, and determined. And that made Chijiwa very happy. Since he'd began piloting the Shinden he'd not come across someone like this; someone worth fighting.

The Santa Cruz, in a lazy arc, was beginning to reverse at the peak of the somersault.

By that point, Chijiwa knew what was going on.

The first-class flight skill known among the Amatsukami as the "Left Screw" – it involved doing a half-roll at the peak of the somersault, to cause the pursuing plane to overshoot past you.

And see, the Santa Cruz, doing a reverse, began to slide to its left. He vaguely remembered the Levahm Empire calling it the "Ishmael Turn," after its originating pilot.

This was the first time Chijiwa would see it being used in combat. Because there was the risk of losing speed and falling, pilots never attempted it.

The enemy pilot was probably smirking, thinking "gotcha." Performing a legendary maneuver that only three people had perfected, he probably felt like he'd overcome Chijiwa's nerves.

"I win," Chijiwa whispered, as he lifted his foot from his left footbar, and lightly kicked the right footbar. The Shinden barely reacted to the rudder, sliding to its left as it reversed.

That was the exact same movement as Charles.

Chijiwa felt a bit lonely the fight was drawing to an end, but he was satisfied because he'd be able to finish it with a flourish.

Smirking, thinking "gotcha," Charles lifted his foot from his left footbar, and lightly kicked the right footbar. Whilst everyone knew of its existence, only three had executed it in combat, the Ishmael Turn. The one giving chase would suddenly find himself being chased, and he would be filled with a look of astonishment. If he had forward guns he'd immediately open fire, but the recon plane didn't have any. So he'd do the turn, then immediately flee at full power.

Still sliding sideways on his back, he tilted his control stick to the right, lowering his right wing. As if flying on its back, the plane slowly rolled, drifting like an automobile. Then, adjusting the aileron, he caused the plane to hover a bit, causing a floating feeling from the lack of gravity, whilst still on his back.

The Santa Cruz responded well to his precise controls.

The maneuver he wanted worked flawlessly, and he was pointed straight at the belly of his pursuit – or he was supposed to be.

"—Huh?"

But the enemy that should be in front of him wasn't there. The pilot that was supposed to be astonished wasn't there. Only the blue, summer sky he was so used to looking at was in front of him.

What if.

He glanced behind him, eyes widened in surprise.

Behind the Santa Cruz, the Shinden completed adjusting the aileron, finished hovering a bit, and had gone past the point of the floating feeling from the lack of gravity. Now, it was just pointing its 20mm guns, glistening black in the sun, at him.

The distance between them – well it wasn't possible to evade. It was the same distance as when he'd been taken down before; a distance where there was nothing else to do.

Charles understood that he had underestimated his enemy too much. And he also knew it was far too late to regret things.

"Fana," He whispered, apologetically.

Having safely completed his screw-like maneuver, Chijiwa re-gripped his control stick, and stared straight ahead at his prey.

The back of the Santa Cruz was right next to the Shinden's 20mm guns.

He could imagine the pilot's astonished face.

It would be harder to miss at this range. One salvo would cause shredded bits of the enemy plane to rain on his Shinden.

Chijiwa placed a finger over his trigger.

And he saw the expression on Fana del Moral's face, seating in the rear seat.

I see, the rumors of her being as beautiful as the light were true.

Her silhouette glimmered. Otherworldly was an apt description, and her figure, that which seemingly came from the netherworld, momentarily sucked away his soul.

And then Chijiwa realized that this beautiful empress wore a determined look on her face, with her hand gripping the machine gun pointed directly at the Shinden. Her eyes were cold and clear, like that of a warrior of the sky, piercing through him.

"—Uh…"

With an utterance of shock, Chijiwa snapped back into himself, realized that his life was in danger, and pulled the trigger on his 20mm guns. Fana's eyes had been peeled open from the start of the fight. She was used to dealing with fear. Since her childhood, she always used it to escape from the unreasonableness of the world – to watch reality like an opera, from her castle on the other side of the glass panel, like the most extreme of cowards. Now, she stared at the enemy plane's movements like that.

Fana, on the other side of the glass panel, could even observe herself like someone else. That's why she could ignore any fear and simply stare at the entirety of the fight,

from start to end, from her rear seat.

Even the extreme descent that almost made her black out, to the emergency turn, she'd gone through all of it in the two weeks of training before departure, so she was barely able to stay conscious.

And what's more, Fana had been silently waiting over Charles' words on the island.

"If I want to shoot them down, what should I do?"

"You need them to come as close as possible. Until their plane is sticking out from the sight."

Now, the enemy was so close that his plane was sticking out of the sight.

Fana stepped forward, through the glass panel, back into reality.

Sounds returned to her. The harsh sound of wind blasting against the windshield. And she could see the enemy pilot looking astonished, gripping his control stick right in front of her.

She could feel cold steel at her fingertips.

The machine gun's trigger.

"Fana," She heard, from across the seat.

She thought that meant, "fire."

Heavy, dull gunshot sounds echoed between the Santa Cruz and the Shinden, and scorching crimson trails carved paths between them.

Like the clash of ultimate blows between two master swordsmen – in a flash, the sky was sliced apart.

The next moment, the sound of exploding shells shook the world, and brown-colored flames engulfed them.

Shattered silver spiraled into the blue sky, like spraying mist, and the summer sunlight reflected and glimmered off the shrapnel.

The exchange of shots lasted but a moment.

Both fired almost simultaneously – and that was enough to decide the contest.

The sound of gunshots still reverberated in Charles' ears.

The sound of the swirling wind washed away everything else.

A static blue sky awaited on the other side of the windshield.

The Santa Cruz was still flying. He glanced at the dashboard. Nothing abnormal.

Charles let go of the left footbar. The moment he saw Fana for some reason gripping the machine gun, he instinctively slid the plane to the side. If he were just a bit later, they would have turned into shreds of flesh, to fall into the ocean. Fortunately the enemy pilot hesitated to shoot.

He turned around.

The empress-to-be was looking dumbfounded as she held the machine gun trigger. The smell of gunpowder filled the seats. Looking like she was holding back tears, Fana turned around to him.

"Charles."

Her voice was raspy. She looked like she didn't know what happened.

"Fana."

"It hit, it hit."

"Did you shoot?"

"Did he die?"

After that broken conversation, Charles glanced around, then shook his head sideways, and pointed down and to the right.

"It hit the front of his left wing. He won't be able to fight in the air with that."

He was pointing at the Shinden, wobbling in the air with the front third of its left wing shorn away.

Fana's eyes widened. The plane was bobbing, and it looked like just a touch of a finger would send it falling, but the pilot was desperately keeping it in the air.

"He's alive, thank god."

Fana sounded relieved.

What're you doing worrying over the safety of an enemy on a battlefield, chuckled Charles, but he stared down at the Shinden, to hide his amusement.

"It's amazing he can still fly. He's an enemy, but he's incredibly skilled."

300 meters under the Santa Cruz, the enemy pilot was struggling with the check helm to keep balance. If he had wing-mounted guns he'd be able to down the plane, but the Santa Cruz lacked the armament for that. He could fly behind and under the enemy and shoot it down with the rear gun, but there was no point in risking danger to do that. His primary goal was to carry Fana to safety, after all.

The fight was over.

"Shall we send him a greeting?" he whispered, as he slowly brought the Santa Cruz down, stopping at the Shinden's side, just as they'd been before the fight began.

The enemy pilot's face was on the other side of the windshield.

Charles slid his windshield back, and looked at the enemy pilot.

He, noticing, slid his windshield back, too, and looked nobly at Charles.

Neither of them were reckless enough to continue a futile battle.

Charles silently saluted.

The enemy pilot, looking a bit bitter, made a grim face and saluted back.

Fana looked at the two enemy pilots in fascination. It was odd, but she also felt a bit warm. Even though they were enemies, the sight of two men acknowledging each other was splendid.

Charles closed the windshield and sped up, leaving the Shinden behind.

Charles wagged his wings up and down. This was a pilot's greeting. The other pilot could no longer spare a look in his direction, but he'd managed to stabilize, and soon vanished from their sight.

Only the blue sky was left in front of Charles.

Nothing would obstruct them now. All he had to do was fly until sunset, and they'd reach Cyon island. And to the west of Cyon island was Levahm-dominated airspace.

Charles simply flew.

He thought of nothing but flying, and kept careful watch, to make sure he wouldn't slip up at the end.

Fana did the same. Without saying anything superfluous, she kept watch over the back of the Santa Cruz.

They didn't speak, but the atmosphere in the seat was far more homely than before. It was like that of a pair of pilots who'd flown together for several years, and would keep flying together for the foreseeable future. Charles and Fana lent their backs to each other.

Eventually – the final destination of the flight appeared on the ocean surface reflecting the evening sunset.

The meeting place with the ship sent from the mainland was a nameless crag some 110 kilometers from Cyon island.

Charles lowered his two floats. Then, drawing an elegant angle of elevation in the air, the Santa Cruz landed on the surface like the setting sun.

Golden traces radiated on the surface and soundlessly vanished.

The spinning of the propeller died away, and after looking for a moment like they were turning again, slowly stopped groaning, and eventually, stopped.

After switching the metal hydride stack to "recharge," Charles closed his eyes, took a deep breath, and smiled as he turned around.

"Thank you very much, Lady, the flying has come to an end."

Fana turned to Charles, and with an awkward smile, replied, "But you still have things to do?"

"Yes. I need to contact La Pista airbase, to call someone from the mainland. After that, all we have to do is wait for the ship."

"I see." Fana lowered her eyes and quietly whispered.

Charles' heart wrenched. He felt restless. But to hide that feeling, he opened the

windshield, feigning happiness.

"This is the final night. There's no more need for aerial combat, so let's just enjoy ourselves."

And then he stood on the wing, stretched out a hand to help Fana out of her seat, and pumped air into the rubber boat. Now completely experienced, Fana helped with the preparations.

Lukewarm wind blew past the ocean, reflecting the evening. Somewhere amidst the salty wind was a scent signaling the end of summer.

Chapter 10

"It's not the final night. You should just get on the airship, too, and go to Esmeralda. After all this work, isn't it odd you don't at least get a badge? Don't worry, I can make everyone understand."

After consuming a simple dinner of dried bread and emergency rations, Fana forced herself to sound bright.

The summer stars already hung over their heads as their rubber boat drifted on the waves. Charles forced a smile, and shook his head.

"It's not that simple. The Eighth Special Mission Fleet has to be the one that saved the Lady, to save the imperial prince Carlos' face, too. Not a refugee mercenary."

"I don't understand. Why fixate on saving face?"

"It's the government's job to make simple things look complex."

After a moment of glancing here and there, looking unsatisfied, Fana sounded determined and continued.

"Then, leaving that aside, wouldn't they at least allow you to step on the airship with me, and watch over the festivities?"

"What would happen to the Santa Cruz?"

"We can get someone else to pilot it home. Yes, that would work. They'll listen to me if I ask. Right? Let's go to Esmeralda together. I'll take you around the city when I'm free." Fana clung to her dreams.

It would be wonderful if she could. Charles felt a bit lonely having to leave Fana like this, too.

However, mercenaries can't see any dreams.

Charles inhabited the rock bottom of society, while Fana dwelt at the very top. It was fortune's mischief that they were able to coincidentally spend time together, but they

were like the earth and the star. When the time came, they had to return to their own worlds.

But Fana wouldn't listen, no matter how much he said that. She wanted to bring Charles to the imperial capital Esmeralda at any cost, to drag him along in the parade. And no matter what he said, she wouldn't budge from that.

So Charles decided. Even if he had to lie, one that might hurt Fana, he'd have to mollify her about parting by tomorrow.

"Let's set this straight, I'm just a mercenary. I can no longer help the Lady, and if I do as the Lady wishes, I won't be able to get my payment. That would leave me in quite a bind."

Fana opened her eyes wide, and then blinked, at Charles' words. Feeling stabs in his heart, he continued.

"Money is what motivates mercenaries. I accepted this operation for the money. That's the type of person I am."

"You're lying. Why are you lying like that now?"

"I'm not. I accepted this job under the condition that we would part here. And if we don't, I won't receive my reward. It's a proper, equitable reward that would let me enjoy life three times over. Are you telling me not to accept that?"

"No, but-"

"If I have that much money, I wouldn't have to go kill people in planes. And I'll be able to build a house in some distant island, and live out my life in happiness. Is that bad?"

"It's not bad... but, then, are you alright with never seeing me again?"

Charles' heart throbbed at the question. And he knew exactly why.

But…he couldn't put himself at the front, here.

Charles berated himself.

Even now, the del Moral Aerial Knights were fighting. Six months after the war broke

out, and they numbered less than half. If he were to just wander over to the imperial capital with Fana, he wouldn't be able to face his comrades that were fighting for their lives, nor those who'd already died. And this operation, to begin with, was possible because of their sacrifice.

Stuck between two contradictions, Charles couldn't answer the question. He wanted to lie and say he was fine with it, but the words got stuck in his throat.

That gave Fana all she wanted.

"See? We've just become friends, it's not right that we part tomorrow. It's alright, as long as I request it, you'll be rewarded, and you'll also be able to take part in the parade. After you get your reward, you should quit the Knights and live in Esmeralda. Then we could meet at times, right?"

"Lady, there's no end to it if you keep talking about dreams."

"What? You're so pessimistic. You just did what no one could do, so you can be more haughty about it. When the people come to pick me up, you can look down on them. They've done nothing, and all they're doing is sideswiping your glory," Fana said, as she puffed her cheeks. For some reason, her personality dramatically changed over the trip, or rather, she returned to the Fana of old. Staring with irritation at Charles' wishy-washy attitude, she continued firing severe words at him.

Not seeing any grounds being given by either party, Charles decided to put up a white flag. Night was passing, and he felt there was no point in arguing about tomorrow further.

"Fine, sure, whatever, I surrender. The Lady may do as she pleases with me."

"What is with that careless attitude? You're making me sound like a selfish, stubborn girl."

"I only see a selfish, stubborn girl in front of me."

"My, how rude. I listened to your excuses. I just won't accept them," Fana said, as she looked at Charles with an "duh" expression. For an instant, Charles imagined the imperial prince Carlo being whipped by Fana, but he decided to wave that image away.

"Alright. Then Charles will also step on the ship, and go to Esmeralda, okay?"

"Yes, sure, alright. I'll go with you wherever."

"Um, and I also have one more request."

"Y-Yes?"

Charles was already being vigilant, but Fana said something completely unexpected.

"Tell me more about your mother's story."

"Huh?"

"The story your mother told me, as she sat by my bed. She ended up being fired because of me, so I never got to hear the rest of it. Charles must have heard the same story, right?"

Fana was talking about the Amatsukami history. Of course, like Fana, Charles had also been told the story as he went to sleep, and he remembered most of it.

"Where did you leave off?"

"Where the hero Nobuyasu was killed by Katsuhide's betrayal. The formerly Nobuyasu's vassal-in-charge-of-sandals was leading an expedition army to get revenge, and that's where the story ended."

"That's the most fun part!"

"Exactly. I wanted to know the rest, and I looked for books, but, you know, our library had absolutely nothing on the Amatsukami, so I could never find it," Fana said mournfully, and then she looked at Charles with hopeful eyes.

Charles smiled. He would happily answer this sort of request. And he thought it was a good thing that the empress-to-be was interested in the Amatsukami history.

"I can't tell it as well as my mother, but I'll try to imitate her as best I can."

Fana's face lit up in a bright expression, like a spring flower.

"Thank you, Charles. I'll go to sleep as I listen to the story, like I did when I was a child."

"Yes, please do. I'll keep telling it until the Lady sleeps."

Fana rested her back against the boat, pulled the blanket to her shoulders, and looked at Charles with sparkling eyes.

After a lawyer-like harumph, Charles quietly, and somewhat awkwardly, recalled the story his mother told him, and told it to Fana.

Under the starry night in deep silence, there was time for just the two of them.

A very satisfying, filling feeling swirled around Fana's body like a spring brook. Something that had been stashed away inside her consciousness, that had been compacted, was softly let loose, melted, and was washed away. And in its place was an innocent, pure, and clear thing.

She wished she could stay like this forever. With Charles, falling asleep whilst being rocked by waves, and then when morning came they'd turn over the silver wing, and rise, flying, into the far sky. How wonderful it would be.

Letting her mind wander to the far, ancient times of the story Charles told, Fana embraced her happy dreams. It wasn't time to part yet, because tomorrow, when the airship came to pick them up, she'd step on it with Charles, and go to the parade in the imperial capital Esmeralda. Telling herself that, she sank into the depths of her consciousness.

Hearing soft, regular breathing emerge from Fana's mouth, Charles ended the story.

Fana's joyful face was lit by the lantern light as she rested her back against the side of the boat.

Her blanket was on the verge of sliding off, so he brought it back up to her shoulder. And then he, being careful not to wake her up, lay her down on her side. She giggled a bit, probably feeling tickled, and then quickly curled up on her left side, and continued sleeping.

It was a delicate back. And soon, on that delicate back, would be the weight of the Holy Levahm Empire. And she would soon be stepping into the royal court, with that delicate back, into the hive of evil spirits, all of which were filled with greed to their core.

He turned off the lantern, and only the light from the stars remained on the ocean surface. Charles stepped off the boat and onto the wing of the Santa Cruz.

He felt fondness. She'd listened to his clumsy wording of the story with all of her attention, holding her breath at every turn. And that sight left him with a pang of nostalgia. Maybe his duty was to grab Fana, just like that, and fly the Santa Cruz in a direction that was neither Levahm nor Amatsukami.

How many times had he pondered this before? But the answer was already decided upon, and there was no second-guessing it. He felt pathetic.

Tomorrow, Fana was confident he would step onto the airship with her, but that was probably quite impossible. This operation was pointless if the Eighth Special Mission Fleet didn't complete it. Charles accepted this mission fully aware that his glory would be sideswiped. The tremendous reward certainly included payment for his silence. Tomorrow morning, they would part ways. All he could do now was to smile happily, so that Fana would be able to live with energy the rest of her life.

He kept persuading himself with these thoughts as he sank into the seat of the cockpit, and looked at the sky.

He covered himself in a blanket, and let his soul drift toward the countless stars as he waited for sleep. There was no wind, and the warm, summer night surrounded him, making for a difficult sleep.

The sleeves of the sky became colored, without a sound.

Countless clouds overlapped each other and became stained the color of roses. They were formed in varieties of shapes, and the silhouettes of crossing clouds slowly became golden.

Eventually, the sky was set ablaze like a wildfire from the horizon, and that crimson traveled across the sky like a caught fire.

In no time, the bright red morning sun showed its face over the horizon. The underbellies of the eastern clouds were struck by sunlight from below and reflected golden tints. The dawdling clouds were dark gray and brass-colored, with red and blue intermingled, displaying an otherworldly mix of colors difficult to describe with words.

Charles' eyes slowly opened, and he understood it was morning from the colors coming from the other side of the windshield.

Pushing off his blankets, he yawned as he stretched his back. The muscles along his body screamed, because he'd slept in such a tight space.

He poked his head out past the windshield, thinking he should wake Fana, but he realized that wouldn't be necessary.

"Good morning, Lady."

He called out, and Fana, sitting on the edge of the Santa Cruz' wing, looked up at Charles as she swung her legs back and forth.

"Good morning, Charles. Look, it's a splendid morning."

The blazing red in the sky tinted Fana's pure, white skin pink. Light reflecting off her hair melted into the ocean mist.

He noticed the rubber boat Fana was supposed to be sleeping in was no longer tied to the tail.

"The boat?"

"I packed it away," She said, as if that was obvious. Like she wanted to say, I can do at least that much. She'd probably learned how, by watching Charles.

Charles stepped out of the cockpit, stood on a wind, and looked at the direction Fana was gazing in. The sun, coming from the east, had risen completely over the horizon, and was slicing over the clouds, emitting countless sunrays into the sky.

"Beautiful."

"It really is."

Fana straightened her back, placed both hands on the wing, kicked both of her legs out, and smiled at Charles.

"I wish we could bring the Santa Cruz with us to Esmeralda. It worked so hard for us over the trip. I feel like it's another friend."

"That's a normal feeling among pilots. Planes are battle friends you entrust your life to. It means the Lady has become a pilot, too."

"My, really? A pilot?"

"You were able to draw an enemy plane that close, and then shoot it down, so you're a first-rate pilot. I'm surprised you were able to stay silent until you got such a good chance."

"Charles, you're not just being kind, are you? Because I'm feeling really happy."

"It may sound over-the-top, but it was really incredible. I, as well as the enemy, was completely tricked. If it weren't for that, we wouldn't be here."

Fana happily smiled.

"I'm glad I was able to be of use."

Fana carefully caressed the wing under her. The plane was riddled with holes, and after being hit by so many explosions, places here and there were burnt and blackened.

It was a beautiful, glittering body on the day of departure, reflecting the sunlight perfectly, but now it was covered completely in scars, dirt, and its paint was coming off. And Fana was filled with a natural feeling of love for this wounded Santa Cruz.

Fana could understand why pilots call the planes they ride on their beloved. Because she could feel an attachment to the dirtied plane in front of her.

"When the war ends and it becomes peaceful again, I want to fly. Me, Charles, and the Santa Cruz, the three of us."

"Yes, that would be nice."

The end of his sentence was punctuated by a large explosive sound.

Charles turned around, toward the western sky that was becoming blue.

Basking in the light of the sun rising in the east, at the very edge of the western horizon was the silhouette of the pink full moon. And as if sent forth by that full moon was a jet-black airship glistening as it wavered.

That shadow was headed toward them. Vroom, vroom, the lifting device groaned like the sound of waves, even from its far distance.

Fana realized it, too, and, still seated on the wing, turned her upper body around toward the western sky. And then her eyes were filled with despair. She quickly turned back to the east, and kicked her legs back and forth, as if she never saw anything.

Charles narrowed his eyes. Roughly 10,000 meters away, at about 500 meters altitude, he tried to discern its class by its silhouette.

Surprisingly, it was an aerial battleship that had come to pick her up. It was roughly 300 meters long, probably 40 meters wide. Levahm's biggest battleship, with a displacement of over 60,000 tons.

Under the potato-bug shaped body were lifting devices shaped like sandals. From the front, it had a silhouette similar to a hanging bell. And on other side of the hanging bell was a number of crescent-shaped fortifications. He could barely make out the shadows of the cannons fixed in them. A bridge similar to the neck of a hawk was placed on the upper part of the ship, and a giant radio transmission device was spinning on top of the bridge.

It was justifiably likened to a fortress in the sky. It was probably the same type of battleship sent off in the Eighth Special Mission Fleet. They would call it the sole survivor of the Special Mission Fleet and carry Fana back to the imperial capital Esmeralda.

"Quite a welcome," He said to Fana's back, but she didn't turn.

She murmured, confirming that she heard him. "Charles is stepping on that, too, right?"

He wanted to answer, but the words got stuck in his throat, again. He didn't know how to answer. So he answered with silence.

"Right?" Fana asked, again. Charles didn't respond.

Fana tucked her legs under her and stood up on the wing, then walked toward Charles with a stern look.

"Charles."

Being called out thus, Charles quietly answered.

"I probably cannot ride on that ship. They'll reject it."

"Don't worry, I'll ask them," Fana said, confident. It was the same thing as yesterday. Charles opted against saying anything to rile her up anymore. They would know the outcome soon enough. What he feared was a sad parting that would scar Fana's soul.

The aerial battleship's shadow grew larger and larger. The groaning of the lifting device also grew in force. The world trembled, like it was portending misfortune.

The two of them silently watched the ship come closer. The vague silhouette gradually clarified, and the cannons and their bases could be seen in the fortifications on every surface.

About 3,000 meters away, the aerial battleship began a light descent from 500 meters altitude. The short and stout nose angled upward, and like the landing of a plane, it dragged its tail into the ocean, settled into an angle of elevation and, as it continued progressing forward, slowly returned its nose parallel with the ocean surface.

The sound of impact of the heavy clump of steel displacing 60,000 tonnes was like the ominous rumbling of distant thunder. Mist sprayed on either side like the parting of the ocean, rising higher than the height of the ship itself, and it boomed as mist obscured the battleship for an instant.

The generals on the bridge had already found the Santa Cruz. Slowly, they turned, and at around 1,000 meters distance it came to a stop, its port-side facing them.

The big wave created by the ship reached them. The Santa Cruz wobbled, and Charles held Fana's hand.

They locked eyes. And their intertwined fingers held fast to each other.

For a moment, Fana looked like she would cry, but she quickly erased that with a smile.

"Congratulations, Charles. You were able to do something no one else could do."

"We, were able to do it. If the Lady hadn't saved the Santa Cruz, I would be fish-feed right now."

"Stop deferring so much, you should puff your chest out and be proud. Even if no one else knows, I'll always remember what Charles did."

They saw a small boat lowered by crane from the port-side of the battleship. The moment the boat hit water, its motor began running, and it sailed toward them, leaving white foam in its wake.

It was so fast it felt boorish, and after looking at the small boat going in a straight line toward them, Fana looked up at Charles. Under the sunrise light, the two embraced, circling their arms around each other.

Fana placed an ear to Charles' thin chest. She could feel Charles' heartbeat from across the flight suit stained with the odor of metal hydride gas.

It was beating to the same tune as Fana's. No matter what class they were, his heartbeat was the same as Fana's, the rhythm of a person. Softly embracing Fana, Charles spoke the thankful words he'd always wanted to say.

"When I was a kid, I was really happy the Lady treated me as a person. Up to that point, I'd never been treated as a person."

"... ... ..."

"After that, there were times I felt like it'd be easier to go bad, but I'd always remember the Lady, and it supported me. Because someone of such grand stature had bothered with someone like me, so I resolved to live a life I could be proud of, as payment."

"Stop, it sounds like you're saying words of parting."

Fana gripped Charles.

"Charles is getting on that ship with me. And we'll go to Esmeralda together. And you'll quit being a pilot during the war, and become a cook. You should start a store, with the reward."

Charles forced himself to respond to Fana's request. His honest feelings welled up from his heart, and moved his mouth.

"I may do that when the war ends. But for as long as the war continues, I shall continue to be a pilot. I can't just run away, leaving my comrades. Even now, they're fighting

with enemies they don't hate, and dying. Dying alone in the sky, with no one to mourn for them."

When Charles finished speaking, a rough, crude voice angrily shouted.

"Get away from her!"

The little boat had arrived next to the Santa Cruz. One was a well-built, relatively prime¬of-life officer with two whiskers, and the other seven were young high-ranked officers.

The prime-of-life officer had shouted. Fury was in the back of his eyes, and his lips were trembling with anger as he shouted.

"What are you doing? Learn your place and get away, get away from her you fool."

His anger was directed at Charles. He immediately released her, and opened his palms and placed them next to his head, like he was showing he had no weapons.

The seven officers ran up to the Santa Cruz. And like they were tearing a victim away from a kidnapper, surrounded Fana, and dragged her to the little boat.

"Hey, wait, wait!"

Fana's voice was close to a scream. But the officers ignored Fana's resistance, and as if carrying her, took her from the wing to the boat.

"Stop, listen to me!"

Fana was desperately struggling whilst being held down. But no one would listen to her.

Charles glared at the officer with whiskers.

"Pretty rough handling of the empress."

The whiskered officer ignored that, and shoulders still trembling, shouted.

"I didn't see anything. What you and the empress were doing, while we were coming. Nothing."

After yelling his furious words, he put his hand to his chin, and scratched his beard, irritated.

One of the young officers was carrying a bag with the payment over his shoulder, and he stepped onto the Santa Cruz. When the whiskered officer coughed, the bag was thrown to Charles' feet, making a heavy thud. It was like feeding a dog.

Charles was used to this sort of class treatment. It hurt him inside, but he couldn't show it.

"You're not going to confirm it?"

The whiskered officer called to Charles, who wasn't moving to open the bag. Charles responded by shrugging his shoulders.

"Strange fellow. Here, I'll check it for you."

The whiskered officer hunkered over, as if being humiliated, and opened the bag. Inside was literally pure gold. The reward for this operation was five kilograms of Martilia gold. Even his white beard was reflected in gold.

Hem, he cleared his throat, and then the prime-of-life officer stuck his thick hands into the bag, and scooped a bit, as if to show it off to Charles.

"With this much money, there's no need for you to keep working as a mercenary. You could make a love haven filled with beautiful women and live your life in ecstasy. Damn, you've made off well."

The prime-of-life officer's hand was filled with golden sand. Each bit of sand was the size of a cacao bean, and if you were to crush one in your hand, it would make a clean sound as it broke, dropping beautiful golden powder into the area.

The whisker looked up disgustingly at Charles as he put the gold he'd scooped up into his pocket. Then, standing up, he patted Charles' shoulder.

"I'll stay silent about what I just saw. Thank me. If I were to tell him the truth, you'd be executed tomorrow."

That was the trade with the pocket full of gold. Charles was speechless, and simply shook his head.

He'd just finished a mission that would change the battlefield, and was given neither merit nor thanks. He was simply thrown a silencing fee, and blackmailed over a trivial thing.

This was the truth of the Empire's class structure that he'd lived with all his life. Bestado weren't treated as humans in this kingdom. He knew that, but he still felt torn by it.

The whiskered man left Charles on the Santa Cruz and stepped onto the little boat. Fana screamed, still being held down by the young officers. "No! Charles, Charles is coming, too!"

The man was stupefied by Fana. The empress-to-be was worrying this much over a refugee mercenary, and he couldn't comprehend why.

"Go."

With an irritated order, the little boat's motor began groaning. The tail of the boat left behind white foam, and the calm ocean surface was split apart.

"Charles, Charles!"

Fana's scream was covered by the motor's rumbling. Her expression contorted, Fana was trying to get back to the Santa Cruz. But the officers lined the back of the boat, stopping her, and covered her view of Charles.

Charles couldn't move. He thought he should say something, but he was a mercenary, and she was the empress of the future. They were too far apart. They weren't supposed to talk to each other, ever.

Maybe his sense of social class had been numbed because they'd been together for so long. When the whisker and his officers cut in between them, the knowledge that he was a bestado once again stabbed through him. The binding of his consciousness to being a refugee slowly awakened his weak feelings, and nailed him to the spot.

"Charles!"

That was the last scream he heard.

The tail of the ship, for an instant, vanished into the water, and rough waves came forth from it.

Just as quickly as it came, the little boat boorishly cut through the ocean at a high speed.

Charles couldn't move.

Fana, on the small boat, became smaller and smaller, leaving behind a white trail. All he could do was stand on the wing and watch. Deep down, he was screaming, like Fana. But Charles couldn't move.

All of a sudden, wind had returned.

The white waves were showing silver sparkles.

Charles had been left behind, alone on the Santa Cruz' wing.

He looked up. Blue was beginning to win against sunrise. Light was already covering the canopy of the sky, and pure, white clouds were drifting over Charles' head.

When he looked ahead again, he saw the aerial battleship, some 1,000 meters ahead, lower a wire hook to bring the little boat with Fana up.

The bag, its mouth still opened, lay at his feet. He kneeled down and put his hand into the bag, scooping with his hand like the whisker. The golden beans looked even prettier with the aquamarine backdrop.

He re-wound the bag shut, carried it over his shoulder, and stepped into the cockpit. Sitting down in the cockpit, he tossed the payment into the back seat, and looked at the dashboard.

He would have to go to the La Pista airbase some 110 kilometers away on Cyon island. Then, he'd join with the Levahm airforce, receive a single-seat fighter plane, and join combat. The airbase was being attacked on a daily basis, and he heard they were constantly under the threat of ambush. He felt like he'd never return to San Martilia alive. Or rather, he didn't even know if there was a point in returning. After all, the only thing that awaited him was a battle against despair.

Like the whiskers had said, with this much money, he could live elegantly, not bothering to return to the fight. But he wasn't the type to be able to do that. Other pilots were fighting for their lives, so he would, too. To Charles, that was the obvious thing to do.

He turned to the back seat. Fana was no longer there.

Behind his determination to return to battle was an empty feeling inside of him.

Fana would probably be crying, by now. In the end, all they did was have a sad parting. He felt guilty over not being able to do anything when it mattered, and that heavy pain filled his lungs.

But what could he have done? It was decided that they would part, today, and he had no right to say anything to the high-ranking officials. On the surface, it was always be treated any which way, and get trampled over. For Charles, born into the refugee class, that was the only way to live.

The Santa Cruz' propeller began turning. The aquamarine plane began blowing mist, and slowly moved forward.

At the edge of his sight, the aerial battleship was blowing mist everywhere. The lifting device' rumbling was swirling the waves, and a whirlpool was born in the battleship's surrounding, with dense mist forming around it.

After the Santa Cruz' floats had kicked off of the ocean surface, the aerial battleship also belatedly began its ascent. Amidst the milky-white mist, waves spread out from the battleship. It was like a storm under the battleship.

And the two ships, one big, one large, that ascended into the sky, pointed their noses in opposite directions. Charles to the La Pista airbase, toward the awaiting enemy; the battleship to the imperial capital Esmeralda, where the celebration parade was undergoing its final preparations. The battleship hovered at about 1,000 meters' altitude, turning its long body clockwise with a groan.

The Santa Cruz ascended, turning its tail to the battleship, without wagging its wings.

At about 3,000 meters' altitude, Charles looked behind him.

The battleship, far in the distance, simply looked like the size of a seagull. Awaiting clouds tried to hide it.

I can't see Fana anymore.

Those words popped into his mind when he wasn't expecting it.

Fana's probably crying.

The words kept coming, ignoring his will.

No, maybe these were the words of the Santa Cruz. He could feel something coming through the control stick he was gripping with both hands.

I have to say farewell to her.

The words soaked into the deepest parts of Charles' consciousness. He didn't know whose words they were. Maybe they were his, maybe they were the Santa Cruz', or maybe they were voices from a part of himself he never knew existed. He didn't know whose voice it was, but the words reverberated around the bottom of his soul.

Let's go back.

As the voice echoed, he felt strength rise from the bottom of his gut. Like clear and pure torrents washing away tiny millet grains floating on the surface of a river, all of Charles' shallow facades were overwhelmed by that strength, crumbling away like a castle built of sand.

"To Fana."

Charles found his voice overlapping with that voice. The control stick was naturally tilted to the side. The Santa Cruz' propellers responded to the rudder's movement, and let out a high-pitched wail. To Charles, it sounded like the Santa Cruz was rejoicing.

Chapter 11

Yellow sunlight poured onto the dark-gray floor, shining through the bulletproof glass windows that covered every side of the aerial battleship.

El Bastel. That was the name of the aerial battleship, hastily dispatched to escort Fana to the imperial capital. Of course, that wasn't its real name, but because of the imperial family's needs the ship took the name of the fallen Eight Special Mission Fleet's battleship. It would arrive at the imperial capital as if it were the real El Bastel.

Ridiculous. El Bastel's Captain Marcus Guerrero clasped his hands behind his back, gazed at the blue sky beyond the glass, and sighed deeply.

Deep wrinkles covered his forehead. His eyes, set deep in his face, were a light-absorbing brown, and hair that protruded from his beautifully ornamented officer's cap showed tints of white. He was the sight typical of a veteran general who'd spent countless moons on the battlefield. Captain Marcus turned his deep-colored eyes to the future empress, Fana del Moral.

"I want to take that pilot with me! He's the very reason I'm safe!"

Her crazy, disgraceful behavior had settled down, but now her tearful eyes were filled with fury, and forcing her tired, cracking voice, she continued to make demands of Marcus.

Once again, without showing it on his face, he silently sighed.

Currently, in the command room that was also the highest-level room on the bridge, was Marcus and Fana, the whiskered officer, and two younger officers guarding the exit so that Fana wouldn't escape from the room. He'd left ship command to the vice-captain, and he was trying to settle Fana down so the ship's morale wouldn't sink. Making a sad face, he tried to come up with excuses to the imperial prince's fiancee.

"I was ordered by the imperial prince to bring back only the Lady. I don't have the power to do anything else."

"That's terrible, absolutely horrible! Is this what the proud Levahm imperial family does? Treating the pilot that risked his life to accomplish his mission like a dog?! Tossing him food and leaving him in the middle of nowhere … is this what people normally do?!"

"My Lady, please, calm down."

Marcus shot a painful look at the whiskered officer behind Fana. It was he that forcibly brought Fana, and that had enraged her even further. Silently scolded, the whiskered officer cleared his throat, and spoke. "The Lady is far too fond of that pilot."

Fana's eyes glared at the whiskered officer. But he hardly twitched as he continued, haughtily. "That man, when he saw the gold, drooled as he leaped for it. And he climbed back into the cockpit without even a glance at the Lady."

"Liar, he's not like that."

"If I may, mercenaries only work for money. Or flip that around: they'll do anything if you give them money. I don't know what sort of dream you're looking at when you see him, but he's just a vulgar thing that jumped onto the mission for money. Maybe he was acting like a knight whilst he was with you, but he'll revert to a mercenary the moment he sees money. I should have let you see his expression when he saw the gold. It was like someone looking at something worth a hundred years of love," The whiskered man declared with a sharp nod of emphasis.

Fana remembered Charles' words on the rubber boat the night before, as she tried to respond.

"Money is what motivates mercenaries. I accepted this operation for the money. That's the type of person I am."

Momentarily, Fana wavered. That can't be, she thought, and she tried to shake away the words. But then she remembered more words from Charles that confirmed the whiskered officer's words.

"If I have that much money, I wouldn't have to go kill people in planes. And I'll be able to build a house in some distant island, and live out my life in happiness."

Fana's eyes became filled with tears again. Even though she'd cried and screamed and struggled so much on the little boat, she still hadn't run out of tears.

"Liar, liar! Charles isn't like that!" Though even as she said this, her words no longer had the same strength as before.

Marcus looked at Fana with painful eyes, shot an angry look at the whiskered officer to shut him up, and silently looked at the sky again.

The Santa Cruz had already flown away. Marcus felt pity for the pilot. He had flown and successfully broken through the central ocean blockade alone, yet he would never receive any accolades. He had been called upon only to wipe the rears of the catastrophic failure of the Eighth Special Mission Fleet. Marcus felt embarrassed of imperial prince Carlo, who was simply trying to take the glory of rescuing Fana.

That was when he saw something strange through the window.

"Hmm?"

As if passing by the battleship El Bastel, a fighter-like thing closed in from the cloud. He narrowed his eyes, thinking it was an enemy, but it was wagging its wings. And Marcus immediately recognized the plane as the Santa Cruz.

"Charles."

Fana's voice echoed around the command room. The Santa Cruz lazily spread its wings, and with a soft rumbling of its propeller, flew around the aerial battleship. The light rattling of its flight beat against the bridge window.

The whiskered officer muttered, irritated, "What is he up to? A mere mercenary making himself equal to an imperial vessel?"

Fana ignored the words and pressed herself against the window, waving her hand to Charles. She choked out words.

"Charles, I'm sorry, Charles."

They'd been forced apart like that because she'd shallowly thought they could go to Esmeralda together. She understood that Charles had returned for a proper farewell.

But she couldn't see Charles' face from here, and he probably couldn't see her. It looked like he was flying around the battleship, looking for her. They were too far apart.

Fana looked along the port-side of the El Bastel and caught sight of a crescent-shaped fortification. The base for a cannon was sticking outside, and she'd be able to look out into the sky from there.

Fana turned to Marcus. Pointing at the fortification, she furrowed her brow as she said, "Please, I want to go there. Let me out."

The whiskered man, not Marcus, responded. "How are you planning to disgrace yourself, now? The Lady is the fiancée of the imperial prince. We cannot allow you to roam about and act improperly."

"I just want to say a proper farewell. How is saying farewell to a man who saved my life countless times improper?"

"You are not permitted. There are 2,000 crew members here. We cannot have you do anything that could lead to misconceptions."

Fana, shoulders were trembling from irritation, walked straight to the entrance and glared at the two officers blocking her way by the heavy, steel door.

"Step aside."

The two of them clasped their hands behind their backs, unmoving, like statues. The whiskered man continued to throw words at her back.

"The Lady has not yet officially wed into the imperial house. You may give them orders once you've become the empress. You must understand your place."

The words were like needles at Fana's face. She felt like she was about to explode with anger.

Fana slowly turned to the whiskered man.

And from the bottom of her gut, the feeling of an incredible power was rising.

Fana didn't understand it, either; something primal welled forth, bringing about strength from every inch of her body.

This was something that had been lying dormant inside Fana for a long time. Something that was Fana, and yet not Fana, yet unquestionably something that belonged to her – and it was slowly seeping into her thoughts, her mind, and her body,

through every pore.

When it had finished gathering inside Fana, like a torrent, one phrase echoed through the command room, from the bottom of her soul.

"Back off."

In that instant, lightning pierced through the whiskered man. Electricity coated in words paralyzed his whole body.

The silver-white eyes, harboring deep color that sucked away your soul, stared straight at him.

"'Learn your place'? Who do you think you're talking to?" Without mercy, Fana's words, as if ripping through the heavens, continued to stab through the whiskered officer.

Her words were no different than before. But because of her presence, the strength of emotions behind them great. And her feelings, suppressed inside her for so long, hammered against the whiskered man, making him tremble.

He could no longer speak. He was clearly being spoken down to by a girl a third his age. Her eyes weren't filled with fury, but if at all possible, pity. Emotions like that of someone looking down on a trembling rodent, three steps away.

The two silver-white eyes, still overflowing with strength, then turned to stab at the two officers guarding the door. That moment, both of them were also shot with pressured lightning, and they stood up erect, then looked away from Fana, cowed.

The moist cherry-blossom lips opened, and like thunder, Fana's order came down on them.

"Step aside."

She said the same words, but the power behind them was on a different level. It was the voice of someone otherworldly, with the power to force people into submission. Coupled with that was Fana's beauty, like that of absolute light, no, even more absolute. It was twice, four times, no, thousands of times brighter, like the light of heaven.

Unbelievable beauty made people feel inferior. It made them feel like they lived in

vain, like they wanted to just bask in the light. The two officers shot pleading glances to Marcus.

Marcus nodded, slowly and deeply.

"Let her through."

Fana turned around. Her eyes were not joyful, but looked like they expected more from Marcus.

"Escort Lady Fana where she pleases. Don't be rude."

Thus ordered, the two officers felt relief wash through them. Saluting, fingertips to temples, they snapped their heels together and opened the steel door for Fana.

Was Fana watching?

Charles could only hope, as he flew around the El Bastel over and over again, eyeing the 60,000 mass of steel that flew on the other side of his windshield.

The steel fortress ripped through the air with tremendous noises, dissipating clouds beneath it with its lifting devices, treating them as nothing significant at its altitude of 3,000 meters.

Its thick steel hull was silver gray, and the arched body included four 40cm main cannons, four 23cm secondary cannons, and sixteen anti-air batteries on each side. There were no stationed gunners because it was not in combat, but if every gun was managed, an island would be eliminated from the map within a night.

If he got too close to the aerial battleship, there was the danger of being ripped apart by the air stream set forth by the lifting devices. That was why Charles was flying at a radius of 500 meters with the El Bastel at the center of his circle.

If Fana were there, she would probably be at the bridge, shaped like a beaver tail near the back of the potato-bug-like body. The command room was at the top floor, surrounded by glass – it was likely she was watching from there.

He wanted to wave his hand. As long as they could part happily, that was enough. Not to leave behind a sad memory, but one they could look back on, and smile at. He wanted that sort of conclusion. That was all that he was thinking of.

Then…in one of the crescent-shaped fortifications on the right side, he saw a little girl step out, wearing a white flight-suit he'd become accustomed to seeing.

No other fortification was manned. Alone, she stood by the side of an 88mm anti-air battery, looking at the Santa Cruz.

"Fana."

There was no mistake about it. Her hair shifting in the high-altitude wind, Fana raised a hand, and in tandem with Charles' wagging wings, slowly waved her hand, once, twice, three times. He could make out what she was shouting by looking at her lips. He couldn't hear her, but he understood that it was a farewell.

Charles slid back his windshield and answered by waving.

She'd probably done something reckless and managed to get permission from the officials standing behind her. He had no way of knowing what she did, but the sight of her standing there alone made him proud.

"Dance with me, Charles."

From the back of his mind came Fana's request, that night on the ocean. He couldn't answer her, then. But here, 3,000 meters in the air, the stage was set for him and the Santa Cruz.

For Fana, who was entering the savage world of the imperial court, this was the least he could do. Hitting the throttle, he raised his nose to the sky. The Santa Cruz flew straight up, past the aerial battleship.

Bands of mist, cold, thin, and transparent, flew past Fana as she stood by the anti-air cannon.

If she were to reach out, she could touch the sky. Far below her, beyond the guardrail that only reached up to her waist, was a thick, aquamarine ocean, so calm that she couldn't make out any white waves.

Even though she was standing there, unprotected by anything at such a high altitude, she didn't feel any fear. There was nothing that could enter Fana's mind, now. What was filling her heart to its brim was the dancing of the Santa Cruz in the summer sky, dominating its theatrical stage.

Silver wings cruised along the blue canopy of the sky.

Taking advantage of the power output of the propeller and gravity, it quickly paced left and right, like it was stepping through the sky, and it charged forward, and it drew a circle in the sky using its tail as a pivot, and as it did a roll it stopped, quickly and precisely, like the hands of a clock, and now it was doing somersaults while rolling sideways. When it was almost done somersaulting, it suddenly turned on its back, then plummeted toward the ocean. Fana was about to cry out when the Santa Cruz, far below the aerial battleship, stabilized itself like nothing had happened, and began dancing left and right like a puppy chasing a butterfly, and began drawing circles in the summer sky, a symphony of movement.

Fana gulped as she stared, mesmerized by the dance of Charles and the Santa Cruz. If Fana had been seated in the back, she would have lost consciousness out of dizziness. It was that elegant, that beautiful a flight, so free and controlled. Even birds in the sky couldn't dance like this.

Were planes supposed to be able to draw such complex patterns in the sky? Was the Santa Cruz really supposed to be able to dance, so softly, so violently, so beautifully? She forgot time as she let her heart flow with the gentle curves and straight lines he shaped for her.

She realized that crew members had piled into the fortifications on the side of the battleship, watching Charles' aerial show, applauding and cheering. They had all been stressed out by the war, but the sudden gift from the sky filled them with joy.

Cheers and whistles were echoed every time a big stunt was performed. Smiles lined the side of the ship. Eventually, the battleship stopped moving altogether, and began observing Charles' dancing. It was probably the captain's orders. Fana thanked him from the bottom of her heart, and with the crew members, began cheering, applauding, and waving.

For one moment, when the Santa Cruz flew by Fana at her level, she was able to see his expression. He was laughing, too. And then, with a mischievous thought, he lowered himself, gained speed, and ascended.

The Santa Cruz flew high., higher and higher, until it was a black spot over Fana's head.

And then a golden light began to dance from the plane.

Fana stared up, narrowed her eyes, and stared at the golden-colored beans falling from the sky.

That … couldn't be …

It couldn't be. But Charles would do it.

Golden-colored beans tossed from the windshield fell over her head. Catching one in her palms, she realized her guess was right.

"Idiot."

His payment.

She looked up and saw Charles making tight turns over the ship, sticking one hand out of the windshield, tossing the contents of the bag into the sky. The hollow beans were crushed into powder by the air, and fell down around the battleship like a golden morning fog.

The crew members that had been watching on the fortifications realized that golden sand was falling. That moment, cheers erupted, and everyone began poking their hands out, to catch the golden dust. Everyone's cheers and happy expressions were raised to the sky, all of them stretching out both hands, to try and catch the dancing powder.

Fana continued watching the Santa Cruz, dancing overhead, and the trails of gold left behind by the silver-gray ship. Kicked around by the propeller and its air-stream, the golden beans were crushed, smashed against each other, tossed and dispersed by the wind. And with time, the aerial battleship was covered in gold.

"Idiot," she whispered again.

But this time she sounded resigned. Charles had no interest in the values of the surface, because he lived above it. To him, gold was simply an ornament for the sky.

The gold-colored mist had come to surround Fana. The dense, summer sky acted as a backdrop as golden mist rained down, and with every gust of wind, the mist would float, like a veil being lifted, and sunlight reflecting between the beans glittered. And then those motes of light struggled to descend again, caught between the guidance of gravity and the side-cutting wind, toyed with by the airstreams shot forth by the lifting devices. Like streams of water coursing through the air, like thousands of fireflies, they crashed into each other, danced, mingled, and created a scene she would never be

able to see again.

This scene was Charles' farewell gift.

As a mere prop, he'd thrown his payment into the sky to make this moment eternal. Fana realized that.

The entire sky looked like it was painted blue, and as the Santa Cruz began flying away, its clean silhouette glistened with trails of golden light.

"Charles," She breathed.

Fana climbed onto the anti-air gun to her side, because she thought it'd take her closer to the sky. And then she arched her back, and breathed in deeply.

The particles of light that had been a trail for the plane became more and more scattered. And she knew that when it dissipated completely, it would be time to part.

She felt tears welling, but she forced them away. Instead, she smiled. Because she felt that was the only way to repay him. Along with a big smile, she stretched out her arms, like wings, and then embraced the golden sky Charles had left behind.

It was an irreplaceable moment. She would treasure this forever.

And she would never forget. No matter how tough things got, how sad she might feel from now on, she'd always return to this golden sky. Because she knew this place and this moment flew far beyond the providence and reasoning of the ground.

So she smiled. She waved her hands. And toward the pilot she'd fallen in love with, toward the scarred Santa Cruz, she sent her parting regrets with every inch of her body.

Throwing the empty bag out of the windshield, Charles, now feeling lighter, straightened the ship, and looked down at the battleship.

The crew members that were watching from the fortification were trying to scoop out the golden sand from the sky. After a moments' worry for their safety, he began looking for the one Fana was on.

Amidst the golden dust, he could see her, standing on an anti-air artillery, smiling.

With the golden particles behind her, she looked straight into the sky, and, smiling, stretched her arms out, like a sunflower.

Her lips were thanking him countless times.

Good bye! Good bye!

Those words, which had no way of reaching him, for some reason sounded themselves clearly to him.

Tilting the plane to the side, and reaching out with his right hand, he waved twice, thrice. And then, he smiled at Fana.

Then, he turned to the steeple of clouds beyond his windshield.

Countless pure, white clouds were chained together beyond the bright, azure sky, bouncing and reflecting the bright sunlight.

Cyon island was beyond that steeple.

When he was a child wandering the Amadora region, he'd looked to the sky as he lay down on his side, awaiting death, having given up on finding a meaning to his life. And then, he thought it would be wonderful if he could live in the beautiful sky. This moment, just as he'd wished back then, he was able to fly freely in the sky. As if someone had listened to his prayers, and guided him.

Let's go, then. To where I belong.

"Farewell, Fana."

He hit the throttle. The Santa Cruz sped up. The high-pitched groan of the propeller sounded victorious as it shook the air.

Standing on the five-meter-long cannon, Fana waved without stopping. She wasn't standing on anything steady, but she wasn't afraid. When the Santa Cruz looped over Fana, it began flying toward Cyon island.

The golden particles still floating through the air covered the Santa Cruz as it left. And that golden color eventually dissipated in the wind. And as if everything was just a dream, the blanket of light melted into the color of the sky.

Her voice scratchy, she shouted the same thing, over and over again, to the sky.

"Thank you, Charles. Thank you."

She heard the propeller groan. To Fana, it sounded like the Santa Cruz' parting words.

"Good bye, Charles. Good bye, Santa Cruz."

Her choked words vanished into the sky. The flowing wind swept everything away in that moment, and the blue sky dominated the world again, as if nothing had been there at all.

Lowering her hand, she stared at the plane vanishing into the distance.

That which sparked silver-gray in the sunlight lost color as it grew further, became a tiny black dot, and vanished into the clouds. She could make out the wings stretched left and right wagging as it left, but eventually she couldn't even see that.

Still standing on the cannon, Fana stared at the airspace left behind by Charles. Countless clouds began overlapping, covering and hiding the azure of the sky.

That which she'd been holding back began trickling down her face, then was blown away by the wind, toward the back of the ship.

The translucent droplets didn't stop. She wiped them away with the sleeves of her flight suit over and over again, but they were constantly replaced.

Wind blew through her heart. It still hurt, but she forced herself to smile, feeling like the clear wind was cheering her up.

She didn't know if she was able to keep smiling. The next time she met Charles, she hoped she'd be able to smile more maturely.

A pure white cumulonimbus cloud stood like a wall in front of the El Bastel.

And the clouds continued growing into the sky. Higher and higher, they became giant columns of clouds in the summer. An endless expanse of azure cleared to the edge of the world, as if giving blessing to Fana's future.

The iciness that had accompanied her when she'd departed melted away as she stared at the path she was to take. Now there was only one, crisp woman who confidently

strode forth, chin up and chest out, proudly, as she accepted what she was born with.

And the traces of the woman who would be called Empress Fana Levahm, named by Imperial Amatsukami as the "Mother of the Western Sea, could be seen in her white profile.

Epilogue

Time passed.

One year, two years, ten, twenty, fifty—

Things changed. They always do. People give their birth cries, live, grow old, and die. Fana and Charles were swallowed away by that very same flow of time. That's the way of the world.

And also … no matter how closely-guarded a secret is, time eventually reveals all things. That is also a way of the world. Even after the end of the war, Operation Black-tailed Gull remained a secret for many years.

The Levahm imperial household's biggest secret was revealed when most of the people who fought in the central ocean war had died away, in an era where their grandchildren worked as pillars in society. The kings of the skies were no longer propeller-based fighters but rather stealth jet fighters.

One day a writer accidentally stumbled upon a secret record. After five years of intense research, he wrote a book, and opened the doors of Operation Black-tailed Gull to the world.

The book caused an incredible flurry of discussion between the two great countries on either side of the ocean, the Levahm Empire and the Imperial Amatsukami. Empress Fana Levahm had devoted her life to bridging the barriers between both countries, bringing an end to the long central ocean war despite the malevolent rumors of the Levahm imperial court. She was considered a beloved and revered figure even to the Amatsuvians, and had been given the name “Mother of the Western Sea”.

The truth of her escape from San Martilia was revealed.

The book became a best-seller in every bookstore for quite some time.

The contents spoke of the bombardment of the House del Moral, the formation of the Eighth Special Mission Fleet, and the development of and execution of Operation Black-tailed Gull in secret. At the time, fortunately, one of the Shinden pilots that had

chased the Santa Cruz before the Great Fall was still alive, and men who read it were excited by the raw, intense depiction of the dogfight. The author, in turn, used the fullest of his imagination to capture what Fana and Charles went through in those days on the Sierra Cadis archipelago, the heartrending nature of which captured the hearts of women.

After describing their farewell over the El Bastel, the author left behind one, resigned note.

"There is no record of what happened to Karino Charles after that.

His existence was eradicated from the records of both the del Moral Aerial Knights as well as the Levahm Air Force after the completion of Operation Black-tailed Gull. It was probably done by Captain Antonio, who'd devised Operation Black-tailed Gull, and it was truly a thorough work of eradication, as no matter how many records, how many related people I chased down, I could never find out what happened to him afterwards.

It's a bit shameful, but I can't even say if Karino Charles died in combat, or survived to the end of the war.

Were the two of them able to meet again?

Or were they forever apart, unable to overcome barriers of their social class?

I do not have every answer the reader desires.

That's why you'll have to decide what happened to them yourself.

As an author, it's not an ideal conclusion, but I pray that their story came to a happy end, and I hope every reader can do the same."

The title of the book is "Remembrances for a Certain Pilot."

The great Empress who carved her name deep into history, and the nameless pilot who vanished into the blank pages of the past.

It is a story of these two that takes place over one summer—a story of love and aerial

combat.

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